

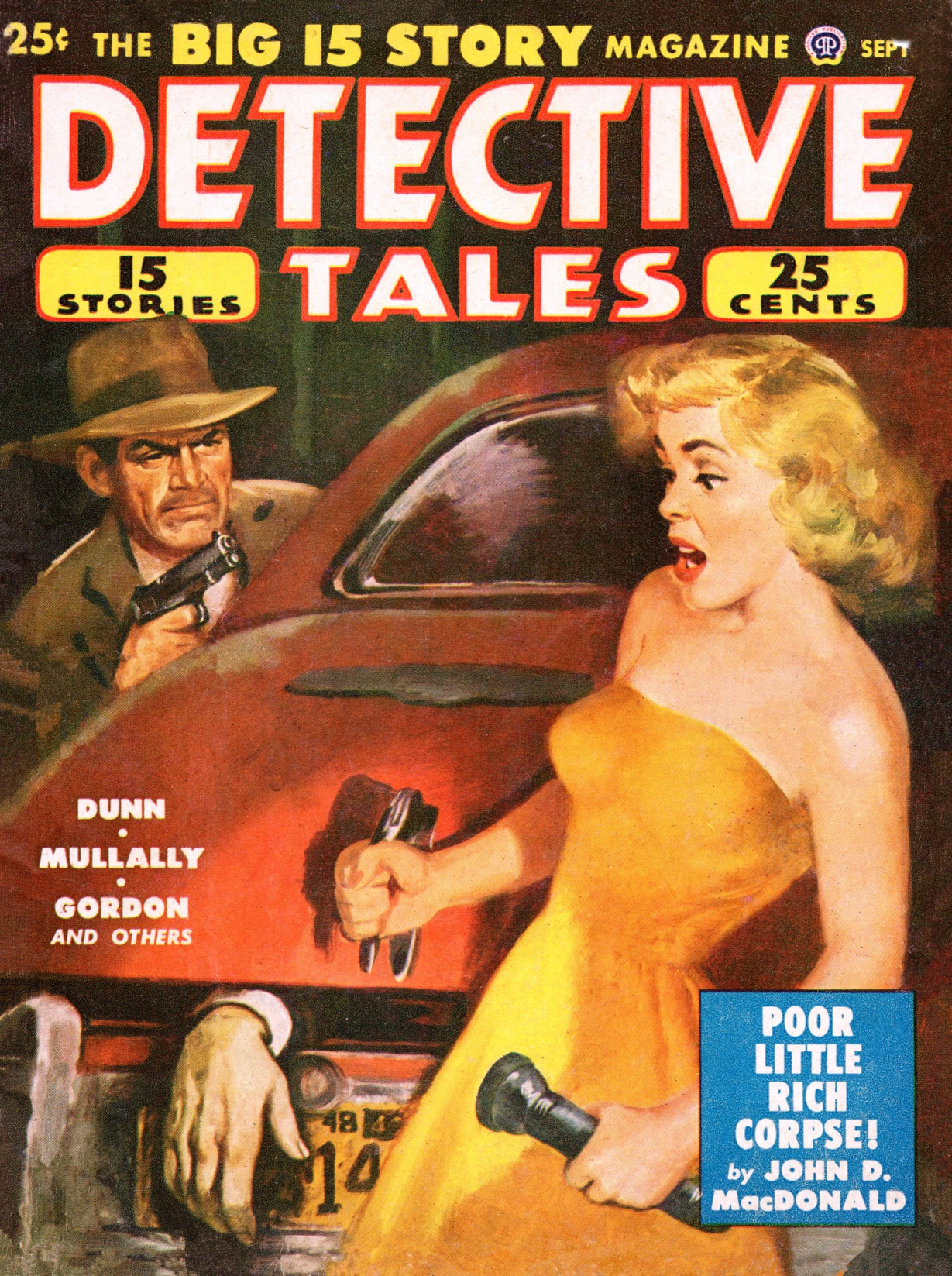
25¢ THE **BIG 15 STORY** MAGAZINE  SEPT

DETECTIVE

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TALES

**25
CENTS**



**DUNN
•
MULLALLY
•
GORDON
AND OTHERS**

**POOR
LITTLE
RICH
CORPSE!**

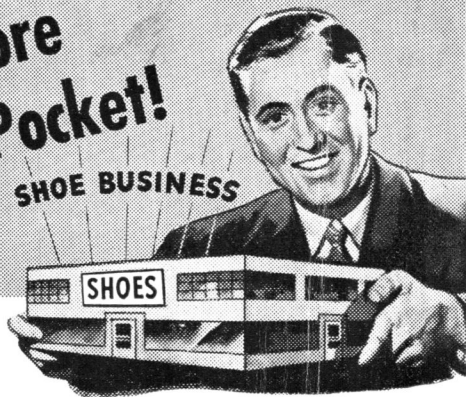
by **JOHN D.
MacDONALD**

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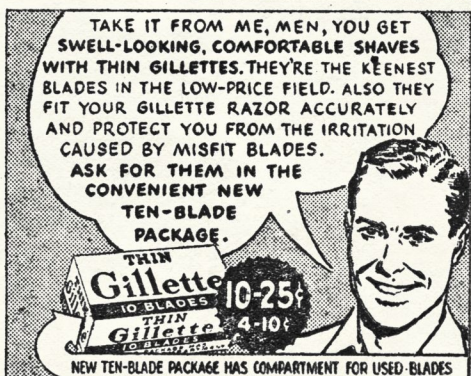
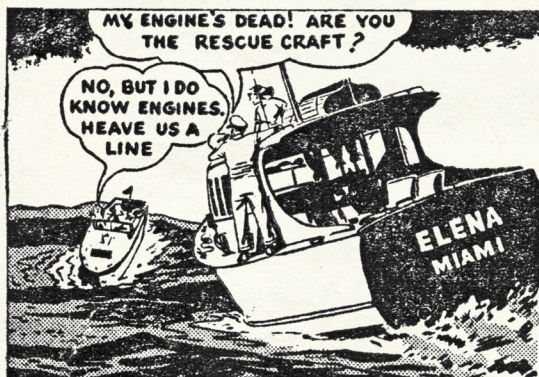
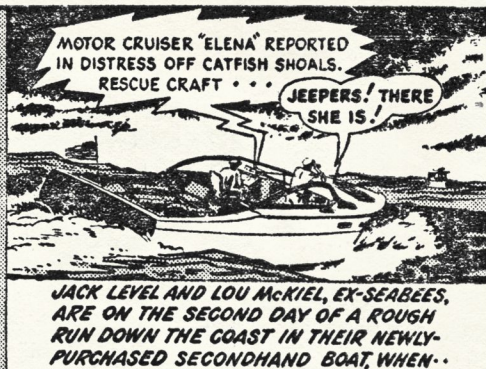
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DETECTIVE TALES

15 STORIES 25 CENTS

VOL. FORTY-THREE

September, 1949

NUMBER TWO

Two Dynamic Murder Novels

1. **POOR LITTLE RICH CORPSE!**..... **John D. MacDonald** 8
—Bess Lenchavits, didn't have long to wait before the killers descended from the cold blue sky to check her out of the swanky Hotel Rio Azul—and into the morgue!
2. **SOMEBODY KILLED MY GAL!**..... **Emmett McDowell** 104
—cried that deadly trio, who had passed lovely Peg Calloway around like a bean-bag—and now tried to do the same with her corpse!

Two Gripping Crime-Detective Novelettes

3. **ONE TOUCH OF ARSENIC**..... **Charles Larson** 44
—made Private Eye Morgan poison to the cops!
4. **HIGH, LOW, DEATH—AND THE DAME!**..... **Donn Mullally** 80
—was one game Joe Feeny should have stayed out of—unless he wanted to ante up in the cemetery!

Six Suspense-Packed Short Stories

5. **LIGHT UP THE GRAVEYARD!**..... **Dan Gordon** 32
—said Eddie Albertson. Let's give it some life—with a corpse or two!
6. **THE LONG STEP**..... **Roy B. Frenz** 36
—took Mack Session out of the party—and out of this life!
7. **STAIRWAY TO MURDER**..... **Ted Stratton** 58
—led Detective Pete Graeme right to the brink of his own grave!
8. **COLLECTION NIGHT**..... **Dorothy Dunn** 65
—meant a big payoff for Dominic—in more ways than one!
9. **MERRY WIDOW**..... **Winston Bouvé** 73
—Lora Lee Dawson, learned that the only thing her millions would buy—was death!
10. **MURDER MELODY**..... **Sol Franklin** 94
—left musician Nick Gordon playing second fiddle—to the executioner!

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October Issue Published
August 26th!

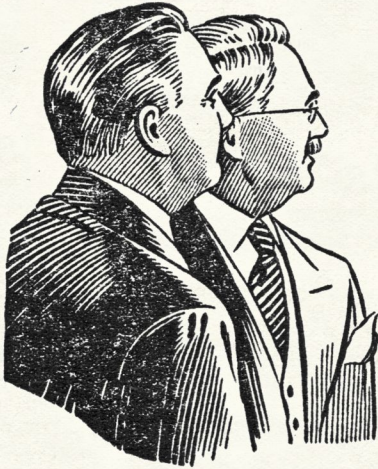


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“
He’s going places,
that boy!”



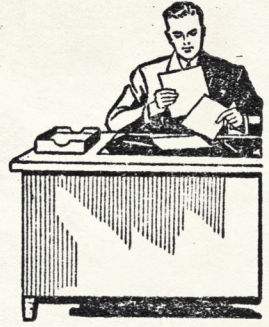
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POPULAR FILMS

Good Movie-Going For Fiction Fans

Ted Palmer Picks:

For A Western—"Roughshod" with Robert Sterling, Gloria Grahame and Claude Jarman, Jr. (RKO).



As if they didn't have trouble enough, a quartet of women from the dance hall at Aspen, Nevada, join up with Clay and Steve Phillips (Robert Sterling and Claude Jarman, Jr.) who are headed for California with a herd of blooded horses. To make matters worse, an convict is gunning for Clay. The brothers manage to get rid of all the women except Mary (Gloria Grahame) who has taken a shine to Clay—but Clay isn't taking. That is, until after a rip-roaring gunfight during which the outlaw bites the dust. *A "western" proving that men are still men.*

• • •

For Suspense—"House of Strangers" with Edward G. Robinson, Susan Hayward and Richard Conte (20th Century-Fox).



The strangers in this house are the four Monetti brothers. The story is of Max Monetti's (Richard Conte) personal vendetta against the others for allowing him to go to prison while trying to save their father (Edward G. Robinson) from jail. It's the love of a woman (Susan Hayward) and the final realization of how futile his motives are that saves Max. *In between, this film develops plenty of chair-gripping tension.*

• • •

For Romantic Adventure—"The Great Sinners" with Gregory Peck, Ava Gardner, Melvyn Douglas, Walter Huston and Ethel Barrymore (MGM).



Peck's a writer, Ava's his girl, Huston's her father, Melvyn's the churl. Mix them all up in a European gambling casino around 1860 and you have a story. Pauline Ostrovsky and her father (Ava Gardner and Walter Huston) have gambling in their blood—not so writer Peck. But when the Ostrovsky chips go down—and down, Peck risks his own money to prevent Pauline from marrying the

cad, Armand De Glasse (Melvyn Douglas), for his money. Peck loses at the wheel—and loses spiritually. He finally regains mastery of both—and the girl. *A well-played tale.*

• • •

For Comedy—"Sorrowful Jones" with Bob Hope and Lucille Ball (Paramount).



Damon Runyon's wonderful story of bookmakers, mobsters and "little Miss Marker" is retold here with Bob Hope in the title role. Filled with typical Hope clowning, Runyonesque characters like "Regret," "Big Steve," "Once Over Sam" and the beauteous Lucille Ball, this picture makes the best of a good story. Briefly, Sorrowful, as a miserly bookmaker, accepts a five year old girl as a marker for a bet on a fixed horse race. When the child's father is liquidated by the mob for trying to "unfix" the race, Hope takes it upon himself to protect her from the gang. In the end, the thugs are outwitted and everyone lives happily ever after. *This is an hilarious Hope vehicle for all.*

• • •

For Music—"Look for the Silver Lining" with



June Haver, Ray Bolger and Gordon MacRae (Warner Brothers) Technicolor.

Perhaps all won't remember Marilyn Miller—one of the greatest musical comedy stars ever—but everybody will recognize the many tuneful and nostalgic melodies that stud this screen portrayal of her life. With June Haver as the star; Ray Bolger as Jack Donahue, one of the inspirations in her life, and Gordon MacRae playing Frank Carter, her first husband, this picture tells Marilyn's story of devotion to the stage. From her very first appearance as a child with the "Four Columbians" to her final performance in "Sally", she and all about her were a part of the theatre. Musical memories include "Who", "Sunny", "A Kiss in the Dark", "Time on My Hands", and, of course, the title piece. *A skillful blend of fact and music, solidly entertaining.*

• • •

For Sports—"The Great Dan Patch" with Dennis O'Keefe, Gail Russell and Ruth Warrick (United Artists).



The greatest pacing horse of them all was Dan Patch, and this is his story—more or less. He gets born, trained, raced on the Grand Circuit and made a champion. There's also some kind of plot involving people, but you'll be most interested in the harness racing on which this film is based.

YOU CAN'T GET AWAY WITH MURDER!



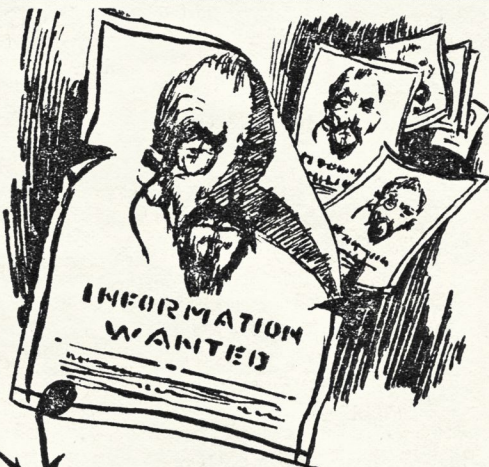
By NELSON and GEER

THE BUTCHERS OF BUENOS AIRES

Although the man was practically unknown in Buenos Aires, they battered his features beyond recognition, dismembered the body, disposed of it—and felt that the money and their love were reasonably safe.

The torso turned up by chance on April 21, 1894. Weeks later, sewer cleaners came upon the head. Attempts at restoration of the face by Chief Eduardo Rossi of the federal police produced a death mask recognizable only as that of a man with flowing mustache and goatee.

Undaunted, Rossi commissioned artists to reconstruct a portrait bust. Photos of it, circulated widely, brought negative results until the proprietor of an inn in the French section reported that it resembled the Francisco Farbos, a wealthy Parisian, who'd been



engaged in a business venture with Raoul Trembault, a former guest. Trembault, he recalled, had been interested in a cabaret singer named Mauricia Chaquelot.

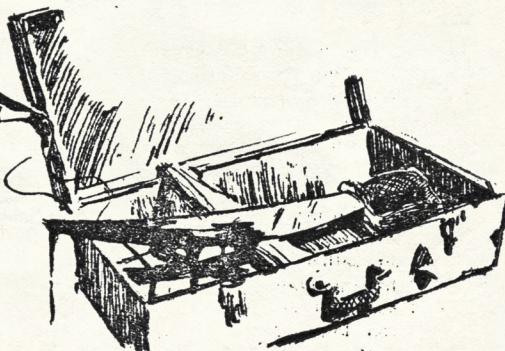
Mauricia proved uncommunicative, but sailing lists revealed Farbos' arrival on April 18th and Trembault's departure for France on May 11th. French police were notified to hold him.

Meanwhile, from additional description supplied by the pension proprietor, Rossi had the artists revise their portrait, and armed with this he traced Farbos' luggage through an expressman to Trembault's apartment, which yielded a bloody club and a razor-sharp Japanese saber.

Rossi sought Mauricia again, but she had

vanished. When he found her it was too late. She'd hanged herself. But beside her was a suicide note confessing that after she had transferred her affections from Farbos to Trembault she had persuaded the new love to kill the old and appropriate the 50,000 francs he'd invested in their business venture.

Trembault was arrested in Paris carrying evidence of their "business"—smuggling—and sentenced to 25 years at hard labor, because he underestimated the ingenuity and perseverance of one policeman.



POOR LITTLE

Hard-Boiled Homicide Novel

*Out of the Mexican blue they came,
that deadly pair, looking for the
man who talked too much . . . and
the beautiful blonde who would
soon be \$10,000,000 worth of cold,
dead meat!*



CHAPTER ONE

Mexican Hideout

WHEN the girl left the group at the big table and walked with surprising steadiness over to the self-service bar in the corner of the patio of the Hotel Rio Azul, he gulped the last tepid half-inch of his Martini and moved with an apparent lack of haste after her.

RICH CORPSE!

By JOHN D. MacDONALD

The plane was a good hundred yards away. Barry thrust his right arm straight out and sent his remaining five slugs after it.



She was bigger than he had guessed from the pictures. Not that there had been very many pictures since the discreet coming-out party five years before, discreet in the way the authentic big money is discreet.

The face was one that you would remember, even though you saw it only once in the paper, with just the tiniest hint of the South of France, or the place in Hawaii, or some business about the architect who was putting up the new home in Santa Fe, which made you realize that Santa

Fe might be a new migratory spot for the really rich, the ones with the big wads that even Internal Revenue couldn't tap to any damaging extent.

It was a face with wide eyes set far apart, deep sunk in a strong brow line, a firm arc of temple. And if you thought much about faces, you'd think of the strength and breeding around the eyes and contrast them with the wide petulance of the mouth, arriving at something pretty volcanic.

She was big, maybe five-nine or ten, and that irritated him a little because he knew that he would be colored in his approach by the sense of Napoleonic frustration that always hit him with big women.

She leaned on the bar and a coppery strand of her hair was loose so that it fell almost across one eye. As he moved in beside her at the bar, he saw the soft looseness of her face and how liquor had given the clear flesh a sag that masked some of the good bone structure, taking away the strength and leaving only petulance and a look of constant sleeping fury born of boredom.

The little rich get drunk and disorderly and the columnists gleefully twist the knife. But who can unravel interlocking directorships and ownership interests—and if a column is killed for two weeks, so is the columnist.

"Johnny," she said to the bartender, her voice flat and husky, drone of bees in August sun, "mix this one with a bounce in it. A curve ball, Johnny."

She was sun soaked and water soaked and liquor soaked and her eyes were lonely as hell.

"Make it two, Johnny," he said, knowing that it was clumsy, but unable to think of anything better.

SHE TURNED her head slowly, swinging the rebel strand of hair aside. She straightened up and he knew that she did it to point up the fact that even barefooted she had an inch of height on him. That made it easy to hate her.

He saw her eyes wander over his round face, his stocky frame, his corn-silk hair and his ready-made suit. He saw himself through her eyes, a male item with a tinge of the bucolic, a shoddy little item that had somehow wandered into the

display window of a smart shop. A special sale. Today only.

With a hint of wry laughter, she turned back to the bar and said, "Johnny, is there a single damned place on earth where little men on the make can't sneak in? Or do they live in the woodwork, Johnny?"

Barry Owen wondered how many years it was since a response like that would have made him blush. Best to get out of the pest category very quickly. He moved closer to her and stepped with calculated violence on her bare foot.

She gasped with pain, spun on him with narrowed eyes and slapped at him, her fingers hooked. He moved back easily, caught the swing in the palm of his hand and tightened on her fingers until he saw her mouth sag open.

He smiled and said, "Sorry I was so clumsy."

He lessened the pressure and she snatched her hand away, massaged the knuckles and said, "Now maybe you'd like to kick me in the stomach, Junior."

Norris Logan, who had been sitting beside her at the table, came quickly over. "Trouble, Bess?" he asked alertly. He was dark, taut and very beautiful, an egg-shell rayon jacket open to show the hairless bronze symmetry of his chest, the faun slacks wrinkled at the knees. He gave Barry Owen a look of harsh anger practiced in forty B pictures.

"Oh, go away, Norrie," she said, "before little fatty here disembowels you."

Barry Owen gave her a quick look. She couldn't have picked a better way to make her tame seal take a punch at him.

The barkeep felt it and said, "Gentlemen! Please!"

It was a roundhouse swing and Barry Owen moved in and let it loop around the back of his neck while he did something very deft and very positive at the area of the waistband of the faun slacks.

Norris Logan slumped and Barry Owen slid an arm around his waist, held him up, swung him in close to the bar, winked at the barkeep and said loudly, "Good old Norrie. Nice to see you around, boy."

Bess began to giggle. Norris Logan, his eyes wide and semi-glazed, clutched the edge of the bar. When he began to get some of his weight on his own legs, Barry

Owen removed his arm and said, "Johnny, a straight shot for Mr. Logan, fearless rider of the plains."

Logan picked up the glass mechanically, tossed it off, choking slightly.

"Go sit down, Norrie," Bess said with a whip-crack in her voice.

He pushed himself away from the bar and walked woodenly back to the table. Bess stirred her drink with the wooden mixer stick and said, "Who the hell are you? Norrie has been beating up all sorts of mild little people for the sake of my dubious honor. I thought this was another one, but you've got scars on those chubby knuckles and eyes as cold and grey as a lead dime."

"I just crawled out of the woodwork, Mrs. Lenchavits."

"Damn few people can pronounce that right. You must have done some research. Research means an angle. An angle means money-hunger. Before you waste your time, laddy, let me advise you that I am watched over by a full corps of legal talent. Another, Johnny."

He finished his drink, set down the empty glass. "New York is nice this time of year, Mrs. Lenchavits."

Her eyes narrowed. She said, "Well! You're a new type for the job. I hope you're paid in advance, because you're wasting your time. You can trot your well-stuffed little torso right on back, Mr.—"

"Owen. Barry Owen."

"Right on back and tell Oscar that I'll do as I damn well please. It's my money, and executor or no executor, I'll spend it the way I want. Got that straight?"

She picked up her glass and went back to the big table. He ordered another drink over his shoulder as he watched her. She walked nicely with long, easy strides.

WILLFUL, he decided, and more difficult because she was without plan or direction. He saw her slide into the chair, between her husband and Norris Logan. Logan turned and gave Barry a look of venom. Bess Amity-Fuller Lenchavits leaned close to her husband and said something in a low voice.

He gave Barry Owen a look of startled fear, surprising in its intensity, and, to Barry, entirely out of keeping with the

situation. Lenchavits' face slowly relaxed as Bess told him more. Barry smiled blandly at Lenchavits.

The pendulum had swung full circle. The Big Rich had married titles, and when the little rich had started to follow suit, the Big Rich had started to mate democratically with the Harvard and Yale and Princeton boys. This was indeed democratic, as the Big Rich do not attend schools.

So when the little rich turned their mating instincts homeward, the Big Rich turned back toward the continent to press their ripe favors on a new royalty, the bitter little political economists, the various types of activists who spin dangerously in the mingled froth of political opportunism and academic rationalization in Tempest Europa.

To those men, the women of the Big Rich were a doorway to a surprising world full of inner springs, station wagon convertibles, and the sun decks of shining things neither launch nor yacht, but something in between—and thus many of them changed focus and exerted their sharp little minds in determining whether or not the very best ties could be obtained at Sulka's, Countess Mara's or in that little shop just off the Avenida Atlantico in Rio.

Louis Lenchavits was one of these, a man with a face stained grey by passions long dead, with one hand that was an odd and useless club because once upon a time certain things had been done to him to encourage him to speak freely. There remained a man who nicely fitted the description by the scientist, Eddington, of his table—an empty space full of little whirling bits of electric energy. But in the case of Lenchavits the outer husk was dead and one sensed that the energy was faded and tired and old and mostly a matter of habit.

Barry Owen went back to his table with his drink, grateful for the shade of the multicolored canopy overhead. The beach far below was a strip of dazzling white, the ocean an impossible blue. Up the coast on either side the fetid green of jungle arced around the beach. The pool near the patio was kidney shaped, with chrome diving towers.

From where Barry Owen was sitting, he could not see the glass-domed casino

where the games would start at nightfall.

There were ten at the big table. He could recognize some of them from publicity shots, and he could guess at the others. Two couples of the little rich, three Hollywood types, an artist who had once made a large piece of change by selling a nude study of a young lady to her father by mentioning that a friend of his was willing to hang it in a small gallery that attracted a class clientele. With the profits therefrom, the artist had successfully wooed and won the young lady in question, and Barry Owen, looking at her as she sat beside the artist, realized that poetic justice had set in because any future artistic studies could be confused with a still life of a lump of butter in the sun.

Another couple were ex-headlines from the time a few years back when a young partner of a big firm had cleaned the till and fled the country with the wife of his employer.

There was one person at the table that Barry couldn't decipher: a hulking young man with a Neanderthal look about him, and an air of surly alertness. Definitely a bodyguard type. Barry painted a mental football helmet around the face and in a few moments was able to remember the pro team and the position the man played, but not his name.

The bodyguard's assignment was dubious because, had he been watching over Bess, he, rather than Norris Logan, would have stepped in. And Barry Owen decided that would have been a shade on the unfortunate side. There are times to break and run.

Barry decided that watchfulness would give him the identity of the client.

At that moment the expected shadow fell across the table and Barry smiled up into the awaited face of Burt Kista. Burt hooked the extra chair out with his toe and dropped into it.

"You're supposed to start with 'as I live and breathe,'" Barry said.

"Or something about a small world, maybe," Kista said. "I was sleeping when you signed in or maybe you wouldn't have gotten a room. The reservation in the name of B. Owen didn't mean much to me. Why did you have to fly here, Owen? Why couldn't you wait for the boat? What are you after?"

Burt Kista was a big, compact man with a brown, impassive face, careful clothes, a touch of grey at his temples.

"Nice place here, Burt," Barry said. "Nice not to have any roads or trains. Smart business."

"What are you after?" Kista asked.

BARRY sighed. "A long time ago, Burt, I ran into a crazy half-Indian kid from Oklahoma who was imported into Kansas City to knock over Billy Amos and that kid got smart and gave Amos the story and helped him rub out the people who'd fingered him. You've come a long way, Burt."

Kista shrugged. "You can't steam me, Owen. That was a long time ago. Things change."

"Can't you be extradited for that tax mixup?"

Kista smiled suddenly and smoothed his hair back over his ear with the palm of his hand. "Brother, you're talking to a citizen of Peru living in Mexico. I got 'em in knots. Are you still making your money the hard way?"

"Honest Barry Owen, they call me."

"And what have you got? I've got this place."

Barry looked around and chuckled. "Who are you kidding, Burt? I know how you are with money. Hell, you'd lose the place on your own crooked tables. You're the manager and maybe you're on a percentage."

There was a flush of anger under Kista's tan. It faded and he said casually, "Have it your own way, Owen. But get this clear and get it now. No trouble here. It would take the Mex police three hours to get here even if they were called. And in three hours you could drown in the pool or fall off the roof."

Barry yawned. "Say, who's Muscles over there?"

Without looking, Kista said, "Part of the Lenchavits party." Suddenly he smiled. "Owen, boy, I think I know what you're after. And it gives me deep pleasure to tell you that there isn't a single damn thing you can do. Not a thing. As far as you're concerned, Owen, her shoes are nailed to the floor."

Barry stood up. "Women have kicked off their shoes before, Kista. I'll even tell

you that you made the right guess. Because there's too much in back of that little lady for your syndicate, or whoever owns this layout, to put the pressure on."

"And of all the jobs you could have, Owen, that's the one where you can't hurt me a bit."

"I'll go up to the room now, Burt. I've given your boys enough time to go through my stuff. I didn't lock anything because I didn't want anything cut or broken."

He saw the quick flicker in Kista's eyes that meant he had guessed right. He walked away, circling the big table to go into the lobby. Four people glanced up at him as he went by. The bodyguard with an impassive look, Louis Lenchavits with mild interest, Norris Logan with the anger born of hurt pride, and Bess with amused tolerance.

Barry Owen walked with his own type of mild assurance. And a certain humility, recognizing that his approach, adjustment, attitude, were all fabrications carefully and neatly fitted together to achieve a specific efficiency.

Things could have been very different for him, he knew. When he was fourteen he and an older boy had crept through the swaying gloom of a box car intent on killing a sleeping man for the sake of the money they knew he had. Barry Owen could still remember the heady excitement of those moments.

But the man had not been asleep. Moments later Barry Owen had teetered at the open doorway, had fallen into the roaring night, had awakened much later in a cold dawn to know that both legs were broken.

There had been a lot of time to think before he was found in mid-morning of the following day. By then he had decided that his lust for violence and danger would result in prison terms or death at the hands of the state—unless violence was so directed that it fell within the approval of the law.

Five years later he was a rookie cop in St. Louis. And four years after that he was being shunted from one trouble spot to another by his employers, a national agency which avoided the routine assignments sought by Pinkertons, and which kept a limited group of operatives busy on the type of case that could be acquired

only because the clients knew that there would never be any danger of blackmail or undue publicity.

He was a stocky little man with the wide friendliness of a wholesale candy salesman. He had pinned a small red badge of death on a few. He had spent seven months in a hospital when he had taken a six-slug burst from a submachine gun in the chest and belly. He had seen aimless cruelty, greed like a heavy fungus, hypocrisy in high places, animal degradation in low places. At thirty-four years, he had no illusions left.

CHAPTER TWO

B-Girl

THERE was a choice of bars, and after dinner he went into the small one off the lobby, the one paneled in Mexican pine, because he had the idea that brandy is oddly improved by paneled surroundings.

He signed his chit at the bar and took the glass over to a small table edged up to an upholstered bench. By observation and elimination he had deduced that the bodyguard was attached to Louis Lenchavits and that the man's presence was related to the look of fear Lenchavits had given him as he had stood by the patio bar.

A ten-peso note to the youngest of the bellhops had given him the information that there were five in the Lenchavits party—Louis and Bess, Norris Logan, a brassy Hollywood starlet named Moyna Lace, and the bodyguard, one Samuel Loob.

Since the junior partner of the agency had suggested mildness and patience, and since the Lenchavits party had already spent seven months at the Hotel Rio Azul, Barry Owen was entirely willing to move slowly.

A few more people drifted into the bar. One was a girl by herself, a small girl with cropped black hair tightly curled, with plump, milk-white shoulders above a yellow strapless evening gown, with Irish blue eyes full of a wide innocence above a short and tilted nose, a wide mouth, an upper lip that was too short, too abruptly curved, so that it was obvious that should

she close her lips entirely it would give her mouth a tight, strained look.

He saw her eyes flick across him as she looked in the backbar mirror. He made a mental list of her probable moves. She picked one of them by carrying her drink over to a table adjoining his. She moved in a feminine manner, devoid of the faint boyishness of the way Bess carried herself.

The next step was a business of finding a cigarette, hunting through a small evening bag for non-existent matches.

Barry Owen slid along the upholstered bench, reached out and firmly took the bag away from her and, before she could protest, took out a book of matches and handed them to her.

He saw her anger fight with amusement. "You could leave a girl some pride," she said.

He moved his drink over onto her table. "First point—I don't look like money. Second point—women never float into my hairy little hands. Third point—you didn't check me with Kista. What's your name?"

"Jennifer Raphael. What's yours, Mr. Smarty?"

"I don't want the shill name, honey. I want the name. You know, like mammy gave you." He kept his voice low.

She glanced at the two bartenders, winked at Barry and said, "All right, then. Buzz Riley, smarty, but for goodness' sake call me Jennifer."

"I'm Barry Owen, Jenny. Now you can tell me how you've been having lousy luck on the tables and you've lost your money and you don't know what you're going to do and maybe I'll bring you luck and then we have a few drinks and we hit the casino and tonight they'll let me win and fatten me up a little for the big kill which, if they're greedy, will come tomorrow night."

She shrugged. "In a manner of speaking it's a living, Barry. But now I'll have to move to greener fields."

As she started to get up he touched her arm, putting her off balance so that she sat down again. He said, "You need an evening off, Riley. I'll pretend I haven't wised you and I'll go play the table like a good boy and you can hang onto my arm and squeal with girlish pleasure."

Her grin was good. "I'm a wonderful squealer."

HE SPUN his empty glass. "Just curious, Riley. You walked into me like an amateur. How long and how come?"

"Three months. Blind ad in a Reno paper. 'Hostess' the man says. I'd taken the Reno six-week course in independence, separating myself from a pathetic little puppy of a man who was still tied firmly to his mamma. The six weeks took the bankroll. So here I am, fleeing the innocent until I can get enough cash to take off. Maybe after a hundred Turkish baths back home I'll feel clean again. But I doubt it. This is no appeal to your sympathy, Barry. First, because I don't think you have any and second because Buzz Riley has always managed to take care of herself. So far." She crossed her fingers.

"And now you begin to wonder?"

She smiled ruefully, "Only because Mr. Kista likes 'em small and dark haired and blue eyed and he likes to play cat and mouse and he has the pass key and there isn't exactly a cop on the next corner. But in the true heroine tradition I have glommed onto a paring knife from the third chef and I keep same at hand at all times. I feel as warmly attracted to Kista as I would to a double handful of maggots."

Barry Owen signaled the waiter, ordered two brandies. When they came he waited until neither of the bartenders was watching and he switched drinks.

"Hey!" Riley said.

"Hush, child. You need a drink. I'll take the iced tea this time."

"Iced coffee, Barry. This outfit is progressive. Spares no expense."

"Drink up and we'll go diddle with fortune."

She drank the brandy slowly. "Who are you, Barry?"

"The commercial arm of the law. There is a man named Oscar who feels that four hundred thousand dollars seepage down a rathole is more than plenty."

"Oho! Unpronounceable, that would be. That tawny and muscular witch with the whiskey contralto. Every time she steps into the casino the water runs right

out of the mouths of the little men with the rakes who pull in the chips. I feel sorry for her."

"Why, Riley?"

"Call me Jennifer, Barry. I feel sorry for the lady because she's tearing herself apart over that Balkan intellectual. She loves the guy."

"And how does he react?"

"He gives her a bad, bad time. And then she drinks too much and goes into the casino and throws the money around. She's the local legend, Barry Owen. They have four colors on the chips. White is ten bucks. Red is a hundred. Blue is five hundred and gold is a thousand. She likes gold. One more drink, Barry. I'm supposed to get you a little oiled and then, in the excitement of play, I'm supposed to sneak a few of your chips into my purse. Later I redeem them at half price. If you want it to look good, let me grab one or two."

"The dope you've given me is worth a red one."

On the next round she drank the coffee. He found that he liked the clean, scrubbed look of her, the fresh smell of her dark hair, the capable look of her squarish hands.

STARS hung low in the velvet sky, and in the distant fringe of jungle was the sleepy chittering of birds, audible above the sultry beat of the South American orchestra. The moon silvered the distant sea. Between the casino and the hotel proper was a small formal garden, where tropical flowers bloomed between the paths of crushed coral.

Couples sat on the wrought-iron benches in the garden, listening to the distant throb of the music.

The top of Riley's dark head came to the level of his eyes. The yellow dress seemed to have its own radiance in the night.

They went into the casino and he saw that the layout was even more plush than he had expected. The room was circular, about forty feet in diameter. A wall-to-wall rug, tiger-striped in vivid black and orange, was thick underfoot. The stars, dimmed by the indirect lighting, shone faintly through the glass dome.

There were two roulette tables, two dice

tables, birdcage, twenty-one, a poker layout and a glossy row of silver-dollar slots. The equipment was finished off to merge with the scheme of decoration, the dice tables oddly lurid with the orange felt that matched the stripes of the rug.

The lighting was sufficiently subdued so that it rebounded in a faint orange glow, resulting in a flattering effect of candlelight. But the light was cleverly concentrated on the playing surfaces.

One roulette table was receiving a slow early play and the other croupiers and dealers were standing idly by. They were the true impassive type of croupier, the professional European variety rather than the well-scrubbed young men of Reno and Las Vegas.

Barry Owen bought three hundred dollars worth of chips—two reds and ten whites—from a bald, bowing, shining, smiling man at the doorway who seemed to indicate that he would, with the greatest delight, drop onto his knees and lick any dust off the patrons' shoes. Barry saw, in the selection of personnel, greater finesse than Burt Kista was capable of. He suspected that the bald man at the door did not fall under Kista's sway but probably reported directly to the syndicate.

He went over to the roulette table, gave Riley five whites and told her to play red or black, one at a time, doubling up after any two wins in a row.

She lost the first two times, won the third, lost the fourth, won the fifth and sixth, doubled on the black and won. "Now what?" she asked.

"Play it double again. If you lose, go back to singles. If you win two doubles in a row, double it again."

"Cautious type, hey?" she asked. He nodded. She lost, won a single, lost, won two singles, lost the double, won two singles again, won the next two doubles, put four chips on the red and won again. Without asking him she put eight chips on black. And won.

"Now we try a new game," he said. She carried the twenty-three white chips that had grown from five. One dice table was in operation.

"Here," he said, "we play the field. I like fives and nines. Same system as before."

The casino began to fill up rapidly. He saw that Riley was intent. He kept her from any bet big enough to warrant a switch in the dice.

He kept an eye on the door. When Bess came in with Norris Logan, he said, "We quit now. Where are we?"

"The fifty bucks is now three hundred and twenty," she said proudly.

"They'll learn to hate you here, kitten. We move over with the gold group."

BESS took a chair at the roulette table, the one that had just started up. Barry took the chips from Riley, sat opposite Bess and said over his shoulder to Riley, "Keep your hands on my shoulders, honey."

He spotted a few white chips around on the numbers. Bess had a neat stack of chips in front of her. A small stack. Five reds, five blues and two golds. Five thousand.

Her movements as she handled the chips were not coordinated properly, but there was no trace of liquor in her face. She let two spins go by. She then put a red chip on 11 and another on 22. Barry Owen put two white chips on each of her numbers, gambling that the wheel had complete control.

The ball whirled, bounced off the gates, dropped into 22. Riley's hands tightened on his shoulders. The payoff was better than three thousand dollars to Bess, six red chips and some whites to Barry.

He watched carefully, saw in Bess none of the familiar exultant glow of the gambler who wins. It was almost as though she sought escape in winning, or in losing—and found it in neither.

Bess had five gold chips in front of her. She placed one on red. Barry guessed that they would give her a little more before they took it away. He put two reds along with the gold—and won. She let her two gold chips ride. He moved a red chip over to black. Black won. She put two gold chips on red and he put five red chips on black.

Again black won. He caught the tiny gleam in the croupier's eye, made no bet on the next spin. As he had suspected, the ball dropped into double zero.

Bess switched back to the numbers, playing them in sets of three. He esti-

mated his winnings at sixteen hundred dollars. That would attract too much attention. He stacked ten red chips on red, watched the ball drop into a black number, sighed and got up.

He saw that the croupier was no longer interested in him. He took Riley's bag, slipped a red chip into it and said. "This was the promise. I'm five hundred ahead. Here's two hundred to play with. Make it last. You can keep anything you win. Keep an eye on Mrs. Lenchavits. If I like the way you stick to her, you'll get a piece of this other three hundred which I'm about to cash." She nodded, then clung to his arm and giggled, leaning close to him. A lean man had drifted over toward them.

He tried to kiss Riley and the man drifted away, apparently satisfied.

"They don't like you, do they?" she whispered.

He grinned and left her. At the door he said loudly to the bald-headed man, "Keep an eye on my gal, friend. I'll be back."

The man smiled, cashed the eight hundred. Barry wavered a little as he went out into the formal garden, shutting his eyes tightly to get them used to the light.

Lenchavits was in the second bar, the one on the mezzanine floor, the one with the jungle motif. His grey cheeks were flushed. His bodyguard sat at the same table, a coke bottle and glass in front of him.

Barry Owen drifted over with a placid smile. Lenchavits gave him a sharp look and Sam Loob honored him with a sleepy yawn. Barry realized that each time he had seen Lenchavits the man had been so placed that there was a wall directly behind him.

Barry smiled and put his hand on the back of an empty chair, said, "Mind?"

"Yes, we do," Loob said in a surprisingly thin, high voice.

Barry Owen kept his smile. "I was talking to Dr. Lenchavits. In 1939, Doctor, I read a translation of that monograph of yours on the concept of individual liberty in the police state. I thought it was fine stuff."

Lenchavits' eyebrows went up. Barry Owen thought he had the face and the eyes of a three-day corpse. "Indeed," he said, his voice faintly accented. "I had

not thought that in this place . . ." He waved a thin, grey hand at the chair. "Do sit down, Mr.—"

"Owen, just like your wife told you out on the patio this afternoon," Barry said, sitting down.

"Ah, yes, I had forgotten. This is Mr. Loob, Mr. Owen."

"Hiya," Loob said sullenly, his big hands still crammed in his jacket pockets.

"That paper was the one which got you into trouble, wasn't it?" Barry asked.

Lenchavits shrugged. "That and other things. My attitude, they called it. Of course, they could do nothing until the storm troopers came in and took the city. Then they saw to it that I was . . . uncomfortable."

Barry moved his right hand up toward his left armpit with a smooth, quick motion. Lenchavits made a bleating sound and the back of his chair smacked against the wall. Loob yanked his hands out of his pockets just as Barry pulled out a white handkerchief, folded it and patted his upper lip with it.

"You see, Doctor," he said, "the muscular Mr. Loob would do you no good at all in the case of anybody with a plausible story, anybody who could get close enough to you."

"Who are you?" Lenchavits whispered, as Loob glared at him.

"Just a guy who thinks your wife ought to go back to New York. A guy who thinks that her staying here is tied up with whatever you're scared of, Doctor."

"I am not frightened," Lenchavits said with shaky dignity.

BARRY leaned back in his chair. "I'm not very bright about the way you European boys run around in tight little circles, Doc. But when I see you here with Loob packing a gun, it makes me wonder. With your wife's dough you wouldn't have local enemies. So it has to come from the past. You've stayed here seven months. This is one of the few places in the world where you can get a look at everybody who shows. It can't be the Nazis, Doc, because they're too busy hiding to go around knocking off people. There were two groups over there. You know what I think, Doc?"

"I'm not particularly interested."

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"I looked you up before I left New York. When you were eighteen you went to Russia and stayed there three years. Then came a long period of political activity, which ended when the Nazis put you in their pokey. They let you out in the middle of 1944. That was a funny time to let a guy like you out in the sun. Stalin's hatchet men have long memories. Now just suppose, Doc, that—"

"Be still!" Lenchavits hissed.

"On your horse, Owen," Loob said.

"Just suppose that you didn't like said pokey and you agreed to cross your Com-mie pals for a chance at freedom. When the Ruskies hit your country, you fled to France, getting through the Allied lines on your rep as a big thinker. You met Bess and married her there. I think word has gone out among the comrades to blow your exceptional brain right out through the back of your exceptional head, just as a lesson to other turncoats."

Loob leaned over the table, wrapped a big hand in Barry Owen's jacket and lifted him easily out of the chair. Then the big arm snapped straight and the hand let go of the jacket and Barry Owen went backwards, taking the chair with him, going limp as he fell, rolling to his hands and knees and getting up with the agility of a cat.

Loob smiled smugly. "Don't bother the doctor," he said.

Barry watched Lenchavits. The man's face had an odd yellow pallor under the grey texture of his flesh. His lip was curled in a jaded snarl, but his eyes were a few thousand miles away, looking into old terrors, looking at the shape of death.

His deformed hand was on the table top. It twitched violently, as though pain had been reawakened.

Across the room a girl laughed shrilly. Barry Owen glanced at her, saw that it was the brassy starlet, sitting very close to a swarthy citizen whose face had once made the inside pages of *Time* as the instigator of an abortive revolution three countries away.

Barry left the room, a satisfied smile touching the corners of his mouth. Burt Kista, lounging in the doorway, turned and fell in step with Barry on his way to the elevators.

He said, "Owen, laddy, you don't want

to go around annoying the important guests."

Barry stopped. "You sound uncertain, Kista. What's the matter? Haven't they answered you yet on how to handle me?"

"I'm running this show," Kista said heavily.

"You couldn't run a toy train if you hired a guy to wind it up," Barry said softly.

Kista laughed. "Make with the jokes. We'll see who runs out of laughs first."

CHAPTER THREE

Exit the Bodyguard

HALFWAY through the moonlit garden, Barry Owen met Bess coming from the casino. Her flat midriff was a deeper color than the pale aqua of her gown. The brisk copper of her hair shattered a shaft of moonlight.

She stopped still in front of him, taller than he, swaying slightly, her mouth loose. "What's the matter, fats? Lose your buttercup?"

"I didn't know you noticed my hobbies, Mrs. Lenchavits."

"Have you sent your wire to Oscar yet? Mission unsuccessful? Or do you want to stick around and live on the swindle sheet? That's what you people call it, isn't it?"

She glanced over his shoulder and he saw her mouth change. Barry turned quickly and saw Lenchavits and Loob coming along the path, Loob two paces behind.

Barry moved over into the tree shadows, lit a cigarette. Lenchavits tried to brush by her, but she took hold of his lapels and whispered something to him. Lenchavits stood very still and Barry Owen got the impression that he was nerving himself for something. His right shoulder dropped and his clenched fist against the side of her face made a spitting sound in the moonlight. She reeled and fell heavily on her hands and knees on the sharp coral. Lenchavits strode on to the casino. Loob looked down heavily at the girl for a moment, then skirted her carefully and hastened after his boss.

Barry walked to her. She remained on her hands and knees, her head hanging

down, small broken sounds coming from her throat. He put his arm around her, her tan flesh warm against his hand and pulled her to her feet.

The moonlight slanted on the naked agony of her face, on the aimless twisting of lips. He glanced back and saw Riley standing in the casino doorway. He motioned her away. Bess seemed to fold against him and then laughter came through the sobs and she said, "Hell, Barry Owen, you're too short to cry on."

He picked up her purse, scooping back into it the items that had spread on the coral when the snap had come undone.

"Maybe I could stand on a box," he said.

She fought for control. "Come on, Barry Owen. You get a drink for picking up big Bess. She's been picked up out of the best gutters in America."

In the light that shone out through the lobby doors she stopped, looked at her face with the mirror from the purse.

"I look like half woman and half eggplant," she said. "It better be my suite if you don't have any hidden urges about me, Barry Owen."

"You've been reading your bureau clippings, Mrs. Lenchavits. I like my women with a little less of the Norse warrior about them."

As they walked to the elevator she said, "You're refreshing, Barry Owen. As much tact as a paving stone."

The suite looked as though a decorator with a passion for hand-rubbed woods of exotic background had been turned loose in an airlines terminal.

She phoned the bar and ordered, "A bottle of my Scotch and a bowl of ice and two siphons, Mario."

She held herself together until the tray arrived, while Barry sat and watched her. He could see the effort that went into her control, see it in the set of her shoulders and the strained look at the corners of her jawline.

She made two stiff drinks and he stood up, took the one she offered him. She went back to a wide, deep couch and stared at him with wide and haunted eyes over the rim of her glass.

Then her face screwed up like a child's face and the glass slipped out of her hand, bounced on the rug, sloshing Scotch and

soda halfway up the aqua skirt. She flung herself sideways, face down in the pillows, her clenched fist hitting the wooden arm of the couch, her strained, muffled voice saying, through the sobs, "Oh, God! I can't take it! I can't take it any more!"

He took several swallows, set his glass down, went over and sat on the edge of the couch, started rubbing her hair back over her temple and ear with his knuckles.

She turned over, looking up at him, and the tone of her voice was that of a person who must convince, who must get her story across. "It's no good, you see. He's bitter and he's hurt and he lives way down inside himself where I can't reach him. I had enough warmth for a little while. Enough to bring him out of that black pit. But he's slipped back. I don't care what he does to me. I love him and I can't help him and so it's no good. No good at all."

She rolled back onto her face and Barry Owen sat and realized the corny direction of his thoughts. Shopgirl and princess, heiress and sales clerk. All could be caught in the same stupid trap, where love is given and not returned—and it was something that maybe even the Big Rich couldn't buy.

She stood up and walked into the other room, slammed the door. He sighed and went back to his drink. She came out in fifteen minutes, repairs effected, the purple bruise across her cheekbone nearly hidden.

SHE CARRIED herself with the carefulness of one who has just gotten over long illness.

"I talk too much, Barry Owen," she said.

"I listen pretty good, Mrs. Lenchavits."

"Call me Bess, will you?" she said with quick anger. "Every time you say that name you put a funny little slur in it."

"Why don't you pull up stakes and go back to New York? I know, it's my job to get you back there and away from this bunch of sharpies, but aside from that, just as one person to another, why don't you get off somewhere where you can mend?"

"I wish I could," she said dully.

"Nearly half a million bucks down the drain in seven months, Bess. Even your bankroll can't take that sort of hack at the

cash balance. The estate is worth a hell of a lot more, but Oscar says he has to liquidate holdings to pay off on your checks and that cuts the income which, with the taxes the way they are, means a bite into your capital. Personally I think you've got too damn much money, but I'm just quoting Oscar."

"Oscar worries too much. The last one he sent down here carried a briefcase and he went home in tears. I don't think you'll ever cry about anything, will you, Barry?"

"I cry regularly whenever I get my pay check. Why don't you get your husband to go back with you?"

"I can't. I hate this place. I'm sick to death of it. I've tried and tried. But Louis is afraid of something. He hired Loob to protect him. And some of the other people here, the employees, seem to be keeping an eye on him, too. He's afraid to leave here."

"He's afraid of a very common thing, Bess."

"What common thing? What is it?"

"He's afraid to die. And what makes it worse for him is that he thinks he should die."

"You're talking in circles. He's a good man, Barry. He's brave. He was on the right side of things before the war and he paid for it. He won't tell me what he's afraid of."

"Is he still in love with you?"

"In a funny way. He curses me and he hits me and he does it all as though—well, as though he was playing a part in a cheap play, as though he'd rehearsed it."

Barry Owen began to get an inkling of the answer. He made himself a fresh drink, made her one, too. She took it gratefully. Her fingers touched his as he handed her the glass. Her fingers were like iced putty.

He said, "You know, of course, that the casino is crooked as hell."

She nodded. "I thought it was. It doesn't make any difference. When I play I can sometimes forget the way—the way he acts. Liquor helps, too."

"I thought it was that way. Who knows you're here?"

"Nobody. None of my friends. He frightened me when he found some letters I'd written to friends. He tore them up.

He doesn't want our names in the papers and I might just as well be dead as far as my friends are concerned. Poor little Norrie wanted to get back to his horse and make some more bang-bang movies. I give Louis an allowance. He tried to buy Norrie off so Norrie would stay. Norrie argued. I overheard a little of it. Then that horrible Loob hit Norrie twice and said that if Norrie insisted on leaving, he would go back to Hollywood with such a face that they wouldn't be able to tell Norrie from his horse. Then Norrie took the money and sulked for a few weeks, but he seems all right again."

"But you'd like to get away from here?"

"I hate the people around here. I hate the climate and those B girls and the fake aristocracy and the stinking music."

"Do you want me to fix it so you can go back?"

Her eyes hardened. "What's on your mind? I don't want Louis hurt."

Barry Owen had a childish habit that dated back to childhood, to the long-dead years of happiness. She could not see his left hand as it was shielded by his thigh.

He carefully crossed his blunt fingers and said, "Nothing will happen to Louis."

The hardness went out of her eyes. "If you can think of something you're a better man than I am. But think of it quick. Loob is working some sort of angle. Lately he can't seem to keep his hands off me. Louis sees it and just gives me a weak smile. Loob acts like I was the prize in a fixed raffle and he is about to cash the winning ticket."

The door opened suddenly and Lenchavits came in, followed by Loob. Lenchavits stopped dead, licked his lips and walked on through the room.

"Hold it," Loob said. He went on ahead of Lenchavits and came back in a few seconds. "Okay in there. Never can tell, boss."

Lenchavits pulled the door shut.

Loob walked heavily over. "Move along, Buster. You aren't good company."

Barry Owen stood up, said, "It's been a pleasure, Mrs. Lenchavits."

Loob came close and pushed Barry, saying, "Skip the sweet talk, Buster. Just go away."

"Take your hands off him!" Bess snapped.

Loob turned his head and grinned lazily at her. "Shut up, princess, or I may let you have one the way your old man did tonight."

BARRY sighed inwardly. The situation was being forced faster than he wanted it to go. It would make things a shade simpler to have Loob out of the way, and a grateful Bess would be easier to handle than one who had seen him humbled.

But he didn't like the percentages. Loob was big and he could move quickly and he'd be hard to hurt. It couldn't be done by following the rules, but that didn't bother him particularly because he couldn't remember but one time when he had tried to follow the rules, and had taken a beating.

"Let me finish my drink, ape," Barry said, his voice wheedling.

"Drink up fast," Sam Loob said.

Barry tilted his head back, raised the glass so that it was almost bottomside up. From that position he snapped it with all his strength into Loob's face. It was a tumbler with a heavy bottom, and it thud-

ded nicely against Loob's wide, low forehead.

At the instant it hit, he took a quick step and dropkicked Mr. Loob, a split second before Loob could turn to take the kick on the side of his thigh. As Loob doubled over, Barry laced his fingers across the back of Loob's neck, yanked his head down into a knee sharply lifted and heard the satisfying crunch of cartilage.

Loob toppled, reaching vaguely in the direction of the shoulder holster. When his hand was inside the edge of his coat, Barry Owen stamped his heel down on the general area. Loob, using his other hand, caught feebly hold of Barry's ankle.

Barry tore loose and, with precision, kicked Loob in the temple. Loob lay still. Barry pulled the gun out of the spring clip. He depressed the button that ejected the slide, jacked the single shell out of the chamber.

"This sort needs a very good lesson, Mrs. Lenchavits," he said. "They haven't got the wariness of the pro, and they have too much pride. Better turn your head."

She didn't move. Her face was greenish,

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her underlip caught behind her teeth, her clenched hands at her breast.

He dropped on one knee beside Loob and, with a surgeon's care, laid the barrel of the automatic across Loob's mouth. It took two sharp blows to break the heavy teeth.

He picked up the hand that had reached for the gun. The heavy bones of the fingers had withstood his heel. He moved to the other side of the man, put on a wrist lock and deftly broke the heavy wrist. It snapped like a brittle stick.

She came toward him with anger. "You—you wanted to do that to him and—"

"Shut up!" he said wearily. "This is just a job. I'm not in it for laughs. I play patty cake with him and tomorrow he beats me up in the lobby or puts a hole in me. Figure out what side you're on, Mrs. Lenchavits. Ten minutes ago you hated him. Now he's a poor, injured boy. He was just too big for his pants. He'll get some new teeth and when his wrist mends he'll go back to football, which is a place where he can be fierce and scare the boys. In this racket he's a clown and now he knows it."

"But you—"

"Exactly, and if I was out like a light he couldn't do the same to me. He wouldn't have the stomach for it. That's why he's an amateur and I'm a pro. Now call your husband."

She looked down at Loob and shivered. Then she managed a weak smile. "Owen," she said softly, "you are really something."

"Better look that up, Bess. I may be something, but not as an individual—just as a class. Both of us are types. I just happen to know your type better than you know mine."

She tapped on the door and in a few moments Lenchavits opened it. He stepped into the room and stared with consternation at his man of muscles. He pointed a shaking finger at Barry Owen and said, "You?"

"I told you before, Doctor, that Mr. Loob was worth less than nothing at all. If you have the panics you better take this gun of Loob's which, by the way, hasn't got enough stuff—a .32 never has. Catch."

Lenchavits flapped wildly at the gun. It slipped through his hands and thudded

on the rug. Loob snored stertorously through his smashed nose. Barry Owen put the clip of shells on the drink stand and left the suite, winking at Bess just before he closed the door.

H E FOUND Kista in a small office off the lobby playing solitaire. "Come on in, Owen. Shut the door."

Barry Owen sat down. "Red ten on the black jack, Burt."

"Thanks, but let me find them, hey?"

The cards slapped for a few minutes.

"Is there a doctor in the house, Burt?"

"Who'd you kill?" Kista asked, turning over his next card.

"I roughed Mr. Muscles a little," Barry said.

"Yeah, there's a sawbones around. If you still operate like you used to, he's got a busted wing, a flat nose and less teeth."

"Reasonably accurate. You object?"

"Hey! Look at this! The four of clubs. Now I'm going to beat the game."

Barry watched while Kista played out. He gathered all the cards together and started to shuffle them. "Me object? I don't like amateurs any better than you do, Owen. If I'd wanted it different I'd have tipped him about you, but he probably wouldn't have listened to me. When I told you no trouble, I didn't mean him. He's been here seven months. I've been itching to treat him myself."

"Get another deck and we'll have a game of double solitaire. Nickel a card."

"You're on."

"And something else, Kista."

"Yeah?"

"Lay off Jennifer."

Kista had started to lay out the cards. He sat motionless, his right hand holding a card a few inches off the table.

"Any special reason?"

"This whole deal is bigger than you think, Burt. My dough says she's a plant."

"Use your head! It was a blind ad. I did the interviewing down here and a hired agency did it up there."

"I think your organization slipped some place, Burt. And slipped bad. Just take my advice."

"Say, you don't want her for yourself, do you?"

"The same way I want to be Loob

right now, waking up with a bloody head."

Kista played thoughtfully until Barry Owen started piling cards on the aces. Then he woke up and began to fight to regain the lead.

At the end of the first game he said, "If she's a plant, why hasn't she moved?"

Barry shrugged. "Maybe she thinks it's too big. Maybe she's waiting for help."

"At between four and six thousand a night, I hope help is a long time coming."

"I could leave tomorrow and send her some."

Kista grinned. "That, my boy, was what I was worrying about springing on you. After that little mezzanine discussion this evening, you aren't going anywhere, not until the cow stops giving milk."

"Orders?"

"Have it your way. I'm a flunky. Orders from on high."

"And you think I'll sit right here until you pat me on the head and tell me I can go?"

Burt Kista's face lost all expression. "You don't leave here. Any time I flub an assignment, I can be tossed to the Federals, and that wouldn't be pretty. So if you want to make it tough, you can be tossed into the brush and in six hours we got ants that can clean you right down to the bone."

CHAPTER FOUR

The Assassins

BARRY OWEN yawned as he got off the elevator at his floor. He went to his door, took out the key and waited for a full half-minute, listening for any sound in the hall. He pocketed the key, went on silent feet to the stairway, opened the fire door and went down two floors.

The corridor two floors below was as dimly lighted as his own. He found her room, tapped gently on the door, put his ear against the panel and listened. He rattled the knob, tapped again.

Her voice was close to the other side of the door, tight with fear, "Go away!"

"Open up, Riley!" he said, his lips close to the door frame. "No lights."

There was a taut ten seconds of silence, then the lock clicked and the door opened. He looked up and down the hall, went into

the dark room, closed the door behind him. Riley was silhouetted against the moonlit window.

She whispered, "I'd better not be wrong about you, Owen."

The moonlight made a silver glitter on the blade of the small knife she held.

"You're not." The bill rustled crisply as he snapped it off the thin fold of money, reached over and shoved it under her pillow. "That's for being a good girl. Now I want more help. How many gunmen does Kista have in the place?"

"I don't know. They have other jobs. Maybe ten, maybe fifteen."

"What's the chance of getting out of here on foot?"

"Not a chance in the world. All swamps after you get into the jungle. This place would be alive with bugs if they didn't spray it every few days."

"Could a person get onto the boat that comes down here every four days if Kista didn't want him to?"

"It comes at two in the afternoon and leaves at four. And Kista's boys are on the dock every minute."

He sat on her bed and she moved over and stood in front of him. He sighed and said, "It'll have to be a note then. How do I get a note out of here?"

"It will cost money, Barry. The employees are pretty well frightened of Kista."

"Can you do it for a hundred bucks?"

"Oh, yes. One of the chefs, Leon his name is, the one who let me steal this knife, has to go get his teeth fixed. He has abscesses."

"Will he go near a telegraph office?"

"Yes, he will."

"I'll slip you the note and the money tomorrow. And look, Riley. I think I've got Kista off your trail. But you've got to play it up a little. Can you act? You're planted here to keep an eye on things. Just act that way. Not beady-eyed. Just overly casual. Kista will be watching you."

She leaned over and pressed her lips quickly to his forehead. "You are a sweet guy, Barry."

"Don't jump to conclusions. I always have angles, Riley. You're just another angle. Keep your head up and we can maybe leave here together."

"Leon will go on the boat tomorrow. So hurry up with the note. I'll have to have it by noon."

Back in his room, Barry addressed a wire to his home office. "Use all methods publicize where L is. Gossip columns, etc. Airmail to me, c/o Reforma, Mexcity, transcript of police record Burt Kista. Advise O one more week. Sit tight."

He printed it in hard pencil on a strip of toilet tissue, rolled it into a pellet which he inserted in a cigarette, replacing some of the tobacco, tamping it neatly. Then on a piece of the hotel paper he wrote a second wire, inventing a nonsense code as he went along.

RILEY, looking crisp and cool, was having breakfast on the shaded portion of the north patio when Barry Owen strolled over to her table. He greeted her and sat down. When the waiter left he said in a low tone, "They made me as I left your room, Riley. They'll be watching you closely. So we have a decoy." With a clumsy look around he slipped her the fake note. "That one is a fake. The McCoy is in the cigarette I'm going to give you. I'll forget to light it for you. Drop it in your purse. Get it to Leon and try when the boat comes to slip the fake to a member of the crew."

She held the cigarette in her fingers and put the fake note down the neck of her dress.

* * *

Barry Owen was having a Martini at a small table near the self-service bar at five when Kista came and sat with him.

"Very cute," Kista said, "but not cute enough." He tossed the fake note on the table. "That dish is amateur talent, Owen. We saw her pass it along after you give it to her at breakfast, and so we naturally took it away from the gook she gave it to. What does it say, Owen?"

Barry Owen put on a disgusted look. "You're smarter than you used to be, Burt. You intercepted it, so you figure it out."

Kista smiled. "I don't have to, pal. All I need to know is that you missed this time. But please don't try again. For your own sake. You can figure what I mean."

Kista stood up lazily and moved away. Barry called to him. Kista came back. "How about Muscles?"

"He felt too sick to take the boat. The doc fixed his wrist and his nose, and he's resting. Notice the sub?"

Barry looked over at a table for four and grinned. "Like a sore thumb."

Norris Logan wore a new facial expression. It consisted of narrowed eyes, tight lips and frozen ferocity. He augmented it by looking alertly from side to side. Lenchavits sat with his back to the wall. The brassy starlet and Bess were in the other two chairs. Norris Logan had a new bulge at his waistline, by his right hip.

Kista said, "First time in his life they give him a gun with real bullets. Bet he misses his horse."

* * *

The boat took Leon and the note on Wednesday. Barry Owen spent Thursday and Friday swimming in the big pool, eating, sleeping, drinking and making small wagers in the casino. The Hotel Rio Azul seemed to drift through the torpor of the lazy days like a huge ship whose motors have failed. Mist hung over the jungle and the sea was a constant impossible blue by day, a sheet of whispering black velvet by night.

And each night Bess lost money at the casino. Her eyes were often puffed with the traces of tears. The bruise faded from her left cheek, and on Saturday afternoon when he saw her near the pool her lip was split and swollen.

He was on a mat in the sun. She climbed to the highest board, stood for a moment on the padded tip of it, retraced her steps, came back out with two running steps, sprang high, hugged her knees through a quick spin, straightened out and sliced into the water in a perfect one and a half.

Her head appeared and she snapped the water out of her eyes, came over toward him in a long, powerful crawl. She clung to the edge of the pool, her face a foot from his, and she said, her voice flat and dead, "Make it quick, Barry. Make it awfully quick."

"He's giving you a bad time?"

"Worse than ever. He's going to pieces

now. He wept most of the night. When I tried to comfort him he did this." She touched her bruised mouth with her fingertips.

"Baby, are you sure you love him, or is it a misdirected maternal complex?"

"He needs me, Barry, and he keeps pushing me away."

"How much did you lose last night, Bess?"

"What difference does that make? Six or seven thousand."

He said gently, "It looks like you'll be going home soon, Bess."

"With him?"

"He'll be with you, Bess."

"You're a funny citizen, Barry Owen. You did a criminal thing to Loob. You took the guts out of him. He's all through."

"He'll be okay as soon as he gets back to busting holes in the line, Bess."

"He's taking the boat tomorrow. He and Louis had a frightful quarrel. Louis slapped him. Loob took it."

"And now Norrie is the fearless body-guard?"

"Sans horse." She smiled, pushed away from the side and floated out into the middle of the pool on her back, golden and alive and warm in the sun.

BARRY lay back, then suddenly lifted his head, hearing the thin and distant sound of an aircraft motor, a tiny sound that was like the blue fabric of the sky being slowly torn.

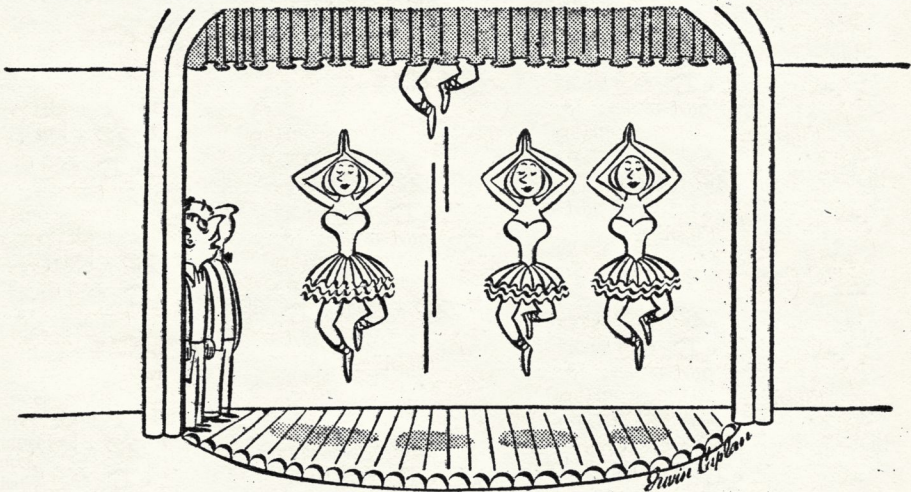
It would not be good to appear to hurry. He got up and walked to the nearby bench, slipped into his robe and slippers, walked to the special elevator and pushed the button for his floor.

Inside his room he dressed rapidly, opened his suitcase and took out the revolver. It was a police positive, a .38 without sights or trigger guard.

He did not like guns. He didn't like the heavy, slick feel of the blued steel, the specialized deadliness of the weapon.

He broke the gun, ejected the six rounds on the bed. Yes, Kista was achieving subtlety. He had even masked the plier jaws with cloth so as not to mark the snouts of the bullets. He went into the bathroom, quickly unscrewed the shower head and took from it the small rubber pouch he had planted there during his first five minutes in the room. He tore it open and loaded the revolver with the six rounds that had not been tampered with.

With the revolver in the side pocket of his white linen jacket, he went to the elevator, walking out into the lobby just as



"We'd better tell Pavloma to take it a little easier with her Wheaties!"

MANY "top-flight" performers eat Wheaties. Lou Boudreau—"Athlete of the Year"—has enjoyed these 100% whole wheat flakes over ten years! Famous

training dish—Wheaties, milk and fruit. Nourishing. Second-helping good, too! Had your Wheaties today? Wheaties—"Breakfast of Champions!"

the plane circled the hotel with a thick heavy roar.

On the front patio he saw it head out to sea, making two ninety-degree turns, float down toward the protected area inside the breakwater. It was a pale grey seaplane with red trim. The pontoons touched, tossing a wild spray back, touched again, and the plane settled onto the water, losing speed, turning to taxi neatly up to the floating jetty where the pilot scrambled out onto the wing, threw a line to the uniformed employees on the jetty.

Kista was down there with two of his men. Smart luggage was handed down and the two passengers made a cautious descent. Barry Owen could see that it was a couple, a stocky little man with a bald head that glistened when he took off his straw hat to wipe away the perspiration.

The woman was taller than the man, and she wore incongruous furs.

Barry Owen grinned as he saw the argument, saw Kista glowering, saw the little man waving his arms.

Suddenly the little man took out a wallet, ran his thumb along a packet of bills. Kista shrugged, said something to the employees who picked up the baggage.

Barry Owen was within twenty feet of the desk when Kista said to the young man behind it, "George, Mr. and Mrs. Theobald have no reservation. We have one suite vacant, don't we?"

"It won't be vacant long, Mr. Kista."

"Well, give it to the Theobalds and we'll see what arrangements we can make later."

Mr. Theobald said, "You're very kind. Our telegram must have..." He made an aimless gesture. Barry Owen felt a moment of doubt. Theobald's voice was so frankly Midwestern. A wealthy farmer would have used the same accent and intonation.

He looked at Mrs. Theobald who stood off to the side, divorcing herself from the petty detail of getting a room. She had once been beautiful. But her face was gaunt, her hair obviously dyed, her throat seamed and corded. She wore too many jewels. He saw that her eyes were alert in her disinterested face. She seemed oddly interested in exits.

As Barry strolled away he heard Mr. Theobald say, "You have a room for my pilot? He can stay with your help. He needs no special accomodation."

"I think we can handle that, sir."

They rang almost true, but not quite true enough. There was a tiny air of alertness where there should have been nothing but irritation, fatigue and the desire to get to their suite.

Specialists, he thought. Not just punks. Valuable specialists who will be under orders to get the job done and get out. Louis must have additional information that they are afraid of. Three motives. Revenge, an example to others and a safety play.

A new idea occurred to him. And he was suddenly grateful for the sagging weight of the gun in his pocket. The Theobalds might want to play it very safe, to shut off all possible leakage.

Oscar wouldn't like her coming home in that condition.

The important thing was to find out how soon the play would be made, and where. He stayed in the lobby until, a little after four o'clock, the Theobalds came down and turned toward the patio.

He moved in ahead of them, looked around and saw that Norrie and Lenchavits were alone at the table for four. He ordered his drink, leaned one elbow on the bar and watched Lenchavits' face as the Theobalds came blinking into the bright sunlight.

Lenchavits stiffened. His hooded eyes watched the new couple. The Theobalds took a table for two a dozen feet away. Mrs. Theobald opened her purse and took out cigarettes while her husband went to the bar for the drinks.

BARRY OWEN sipped his drink and watched the tension gradually slip away from Lenchavits' face as Theobald came back with the drinks, set one in front of his wife and said, a shade too loudly, "There you are, Gladys. Hair o' the dog."

You are a fool, Mr. Lenchavits, Barry thought. What do you expect assassins to look like—assassins?

He took his drink and walked over to where he could see the pool. Bess was on the edge soaking up sun. As he watched, a waiter brought her a drink. He decided

that it would be a fine thing if she drank a good deal because, maybe, it would be an anesthetic, and he had the idea that she might need an anesthetic.

Barry nursed his drinks and, half an hour later, Bess walked up onto the stone patio. She went to the bar and Barry saw Mrs. Theobald say something to her husband and walk after Bess. He drained his glass and moved along in her wake.

"I beg your pardon, but aren't you Mrs. Lenchavits?"

Bess gave the overdressed woman a cool look. "Yes, I am."

"I told Gilly Truebell that Arthur and I might stop here and she told me that you were here and to be sure to look you up."

"Gilly?" Bess said uncertainly. "But I didn't know Gilly knew we were here."

Gladys Theobald's voice took on a fawning note. "Well, my dear, you certainly must be very modest if you don't think that people keep pretty good track of Bess Amity-Fuller."

"How is Gilly?" Bess asked, as though she didn't care one way or the other.

"It seems, my dear, that she's leaving that tennis player of hers. Billy, I think his name is. He's been making a fool of himself over the youngest Willoughby girl who won't be out until next year and things have gotten far too sticky in their little set. Gilly may come down here for her divorce."

"Gilly's an awful ass," Bess said absently.

"My dear, I want you to meet my husband." She beckoned to Arthur. He came up, pushing by Barry Owen, and his small eyes were as restless as blue marbles, roaming over every inch of Bess.

"Come on over to our table and bring your drinks," Bess said, hopelessly trapped.

Lenchavits acknowledged the introductions with bored eyes and a courtly manner. Mrs. Theobald made appropriate squeals when she found out that Norris Logan was "that cowboy in the movies."

Barry took his fresh drink as near as he dared to the table where the five sat.

He listened to the aimless conversation, full of the appropriate clichés, feeling no particular interest until he heard Gladys Theobald say, "But, my dear, I do insist.

This place seems to be full of dreadful people. So we'll expect you in our suite at seven? And then we can all have dinner together."

He heard Bess accept the invitation. It had all been done very neatly. The Theobalds left the table. Bess looked appealingly at Lenchavits. He ignored her. Barry saw the tears form at the corner of her eyes. She stood up with dignity and walked away.

When she came away from the pool the second time he was waiting for her. He said, "Don't ask questions, Bess. I want to go to the Theobald suite with you. As your guest. Fix it."

She frowned. "But I don't—"

"No questions."

"Meet me in the lobby at quarter to seven, Barry Owen."

CHAPTER FIVE

Corpses for Cocktails

WHEN Barry left Kista's office, Bess was waiting near the elevator. She wore a dinner dress almost puritan in its white simplicity, in the three-quarter sleeves. But there was a three-inch gap from throat to navel, and a slit from her left ankle to a point midway up the outside of a honey tan thigh.

She looked at him coldly. "I don't care to be stared at as though I were a dirty postcard, Barry Owen."

"Get your mind off yourself, Mrs. Lenchavits. Just do one thing. Keep your mind glued on me, every minute. And if I suddenly ask you to do something, do it, without question and without hesitation. Will you?"

He saw the sudden fright in her eyes. "Barry, I—"

He held her arm tightly as they went into the elevator, his fingers digging into the firm flesh above her elbow. "Everything's fine, Bess."

They arrived at the suite at ten after seven. The door was open. Norris Logan and the starlet named Moyna Lace had arrived, along with Lenchavits. Logan still wore his fearless look.

A table had been brought in and covered with a white cloth. On it were plates of delicacies, shining cocktail glasses, a frost-

ed pitcher of Martinis and one of Manhattans.

Mrs. Theobald met them at the door. "Glad you could come, Bess," she said, and looked hard at Barry.

"This is a dear friend of mine, Mrs. Theobald. Mr. Owen. And Mr. Theobald. You know Norrie, I believe."

"We've met," Norrie said, "and I certainly don't—"

"Shut up, Norrie," Bess said lightly. "And Miss Lace. Moyna Lace. She's been a starlet for years and years and years."

Moyna gave Bess a look of cold fury and said, "For longer than Mrs. Lenchavits can remember, I'm sure. Hi, Mr. Owen."

Theobald shut the door and began to scurry around, filling glasses and filling the air with clichés. Barry Owen took the Martini given him, sipped it very cautiously, barely wetting his lips until he saw Mrs. Theobald take a lusty gulp of the beverage from the same pitcher.

The sun was far enough down so that it's light had turned from blinding white to a mellowed orange. The suite was very like the one the Lenchavits shared.

The surf roared at regular intervals, the tone softened by distance. Music drifted up from the court where the South American band shook gourds in sultry rhythm. It was a very nice and very quiet party, eminently respectable, with the sense of strain and urgency neatly buried beneath the glitter of smart conversation, the earth patted down with a spade.

It was Arthur Theobald who had brought the conversation around to souvenirs, to purchases in odd places.

It was so neatly done that Barry Owen was fooled more completely than at any other time in his experience.

Theobald went into the other room, came back with a leather bag. He put it on a chair and worked at the straps, saying, "Mr. Logan, you'll be interested in this. Come on over here. I picked it up in Mexico City. It might give you an idea for one of your pictures.

Norris Logan, his face so stylized as to look like a line drawing of the hero type, walked over, his drink cupped in his hand.

Theobald got the case open, reached in, turned quickly.

There was a small sound like a child's popgun, or like the heel of a hand hit smartly against the open mouth of an empty bottle.

The horrible thing was that Norris Logan didn't spill the drink. He stood and his face was frozen in the expression of polite interest with which he had walked toward Arthur Theobald. The hole was at the base of his right nostril and, fired from Theobald's crouched position, it was obvious that it had ranged up through his skull.

NORRIS LOGAN stood for an endless second. His brown hand suddenly clamped shut on the glass, crushing it, sending a little spout of liquid up into the air so that it glistened in the shaft of the setting sun. A drop of blood fell from the hole at the base of his nostril and, still wearing the expression of mild interest, Norris Logan died, falling as he died, half spinning as he fell, flattening oddly as he hit the rug.

Barry Owen found himself stupidly holding his glass in his right hand, looking around for some place to set it down. He let it slip out of his hand and break at his feet, but under the watchful eye of the silencer on the automatic in Theobald's chubby right fist, he was forced to raise his hands above his head.

"Against that wall," Gladys Theobald said softly. "All but you, Louis."

Barry Owen was lined up by the far wall, Bess on one side of him, a panting Moyna Lace on the other side.

Gladys held a compact revolver in her hand. Barry Owen guessed that it was .25 caliber, just hefty enough to kill quickly at that range.

Louis Lenchavits sucked in the air in a great sobbing breath. "No!" he said, his voice tight and terrible. "No!"

"Ah, but yes, Louis!" Theobald said.

"I could not help it," Lenchavits said, his voice high and shrill. "No one could help it. I gave them the names and the places. The places should have been changed after they took me. You know that."

Moyna said softly, "Norrie. Norrie, darling."

"You told them, Louis, and when you were let out you continued to work for

them and continued to tell them many things. The Party is angry, Louis. Very angry."

"My wife has money," Lenchavits said, his voice ranging toward hysteria. "You can have money. All you want."

Theobald's diction had changed a good deal. He began to speak in a foreign tongue, using words that were like the cracks of tiny whips. Lenchavits dropped to his knees, his mouth working, his face taking on an animal look.

Moyna said, "Norrie, baby."

Bess moved with lithe fury, launching herself at the woman who had called herself Gladys Theobald, grunting with rage as she moved.

The little gun cracked viciously, many times louder than the bald man's silenced weapon and Bess staggered but continued to reach out, one hand clamping the dark woman's wrist, forcing it down and to the side.

Barry Owen dropped his hand into his pocket, snatched out the snub-nose revolver. The bald man spun toward Barry Owen and the pocking sound of the silenced gun was smothered by the authoritative roar of the revolver.

Even as the line of fire slashed across Barry's wrist, tearing the cloth of his sleeve, as his revolver tumbled to the rug, he saw the bald man's mouth explode in a bursting spray of blood and shattered teeth and knew that the heavy slug from the .38 had done its work.

Theobald was driven back, falling onto the kneeling figure of Lenchavits, sliding off to lay on his back, glazing eyes staring at the ceiling, his mouth a torn ruin.

The dark woman had thrown Bess away and the little gun she had carried spun near Barry's feet. He kicked it across the room, fumbled for his own dropped weapon as the dark woman fell in an ungainly sprawl toward the gun with silencer loosely held in Theobald's dead hand.

She snatched it from his hand, leveled it at Lenchavits who was just getting to his feet. She aimed it at his belly, and the weapon said softly, "*Tock, tock, tock, tock.*"

She rolled back onto her feet and raced for the door. Just as Barry Owen got his own revolver into his undamaged left hand, Bess raced into the line of fire. The slugs she fired from the little gun the Theobald woman had dropped tore splinters from the doorframe and then from the door itself.

LENCHAVITS stood with an uncomprehending look on his face. He was bent over like an old man. He groped at himself with his hands, as though he could somehow hold the life inside him.

His knees slowly bent until he was squatting on his heels in an absurd and ridiculous posture. He coughed twice and lay down very gently on his side, still holding himself together. He acted like a man who was very tired.

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"Norrie, baby," Moyna Lace said.

Bess stood swayingly, looking at the closed door.

Barry picked up the phone and said, "Kista. Quick." When Burt came on the line he said, "The woman's headed for the plane." He slammed the phone down, turned to Bess. She stood there, blood darkening her white dinner dress. She had a numb look on her face.

He put his fingers in the aperture of the dress and ripped it open. She made no protest. The slug had touched her at an angle, barely marking the warm convex surface of the underside of her right breast, continuing on to open a gash along the smooth skin of her side. He caught her as she fell, put her hastily on the couch.

The terrace outside the room looked down toward the sea. The dark woman ran through the blue twilight, down the crushed coral path toward the waiting plane.

She ran awkwardly on her high heels, and even as he heard the crack of the shot, he saw the white dust puff up ten feet ahead of her.

Two more shots sounded. Her running stride did not break. Then the men came into view. Two of them. Chasing her. The woman ran toward the little floating pier, ran onto it, ran off the side of it away from the plane and immediately disappeared beneath the water.

The plane engine roared, and he tried to shout a warning as he saw the glint of a barrel in the cabin window. The rifle spoke twice. One of the running men fell and rolled loosely down the coral path. The other stopped, sagged, fell to his hands and knees and coughed a dark substance against the coral.

The lines were cut and the plane swung in a tighter circle than Barry would have believed possible. The plane was a good hundred yards away. He thrust his right arm straight out, gun in hand, and thumbed the trigger back.

He aimed high, sent all remaining five slugs after the plane.

A rattle of rifle fire sounded below him.

The pontoons sent out a thick wake, and less and less as they came up out of the water. They were clear. They touched again and the plane lifted. It swung out

toward the sea, swung in a wide, slow circle.

Then the right wing dropped, farther and farther. The craft lost altitude, slipped down. The right wingtip touched a wave crest and the craft spun in a flat circle like a tossed stone. When it hit there was a burst of flame that matched the orange of the sunset. The flame bit into Barry Owen's eyes and when his vision cleared he could see not one trace of where it had hit.

Moyna Lace knelt on the floor beside Norris Logan, massaging his hand and murmuring to him, her voice surprisingly sweet.

Lenchavits coughed harshly. Twilight filled the room. Barry Owen cautiously worked the fingers on his right hand. The numbness had left them.

He turned, noticed Bess beside him.

"Your husband is dying," he said gently.

"Yes, he's dying," she said in a far-away voice. There was no expression on her face.

Lenchavits coughed again. Very weakly.

"Let him die alone," she said. "He was too afraid of dying. He hit me because he was afraid of dying. Let him die in the darkness."

Barry Owen reached over and slapped her, the sound reverberating sharply in the room. "Go to him, Mrs. Lenchavits! Don't give yourself something to regret."

THE TEARS came then. She knelt by her husband and the tears still fell. She held his hand and murmured to him and the tears fell on his dying face.

She was there when the doctor came, when Kista clicked on the overhead lights. The darkness is friendly to death, and it is better to have light.

The doctor, a lean man with the burnished red face of the alcoholic, gently disentangled her hand from Lenchavits', led her like a sleepwalker into the bedroom. He had already taken a quick look at Theobald, another at Norris Logan.

Kista leaned against the closed door, his hands in his pockets, glowering at Barry Owen. He did not speak until the doctor came out and departed.

"Seven in about ten minutes, Owen," he said. "It's got to be covered."

"Bad for business? You can't cover it,

Kista. Not this time. You can't cover Lenchavits and Norris Logan. The others—maybe. But not names like that. Go ask your bosses. They'll tell you."

"What gets me in the clear?"

Barry Owen shrugged. "Mrs. Theobald. Insane. Goes nuts at a cocktail party. Kills her husband and Logan and Lenchavits. Tries to kill Mrs. Lenchavits. Kills two of your men. Forces the pilot to take her up. Engine failure. Her body washed ashore."

"I don't like it," Kista said.

"What do you like?"

"I like you in the picture somewhere. You managed to foul up this deal somehow. I want you spotted in it."

"What you want and what happens don't match, Burt. The agency knows I'm down here. Norris Logan, even though he hasn't made a picture in a long time, has a big following down here. Your record is where I can get my hands on it. You try to spot me and I'll blow your setup sky high. They'll can you, Burt. Then where'll you go?"

Kista thought it over. Then he stuck his hand out. "Nobody get's spotted. Your story goes. Okay?"

"One thing, Burt, I can't guarantee what Bess will say."

"But you'll sell her your version?"

"Only if she and I and the girl named Riley are on the boat tomorrow."

THE SEA-GOING LAUNCH pitched and rolled in the ground swell. The Hotel Rio Azul was out of sight beyond the narrow headland astern. The sun glinted on the water and the air was fresh.

Barry said to Bess, "So the guy was no good. But you were in love with him. You can give him a break by sticking to my story. He ratted on his gang and they, in true gangster fashion, shut his mouth for him. Let him keep his rep now that he's dead."

"Maybe you're right, Barry Owen. But I never should have taken your word."

"Nobody is ever forced to take my word, Bess."

She stood beside him at the rail and he was amused to see that she stood awkwardly slouched, minimizing the difference in their height. That, at least, was one small gain.

"I'm going below and look at Moyna again," she said.

She turned and walked away. Riley took the place she had vacated. "Is this where the women stand in line to talk to Owen?"

"Oh, they stand in all sorts of places."

"If it won't strain you too much, mind telling me what it was all about?"

His bandage was white against the tan of his hand. "Honey, there was a group of people sore at Lenchavits. Sore enough to kill him, if they could find him. Kista's people got wise to that. Lenchavits was demoralized by fear. So they squeezed him. They were making a nice profit off his wealthy wife on their crooked wheels. The more trouble he had with his wife, the more she was willing to gamble. So Kista and his people made a simple and foolproof deal with him. They told him to make his wife miserable and in turn they'd keep everything under their hat. But if he didn't want to cooperate, they'd withdraw their own protection and send in a social note on him that would bring the mad people around like flies to take shots at Lenchavits. He played along."

"And that note you gave me?"

"That brought the flies to the honey. They came a-running and they rubbed out their ex-playmate."

"Then you and I . . . we . . ."

He covered her hand. "Don't fret about it. I think it was inevitable. We just hurried it along a little. To do a clean job they would have knocked off both Lenchavits and his wife, to whom he might have told too much. She has a fake story to tell. If she tells it nicely, she'll be safe."

Riley gave him a tilt-headed stare. "Barry, where and how do I fit? I'm more than grateful to you. I'm out of there and I have my stake and . . ." She turned suddenly, a flush touching her cheeks, and she looked toward the distant shoreline. She said, "How can I show my gratitude?"

"Riley, we leave it this way. Tonight we both check in at the Reforma. You don't owe me a thing. Not a thing. But if you should happen to come into the bar I'll be there and I'll let you buy me a drink. From then on it's every man for himself."

She turned back to him as suddenly as she had turned away. "I gave Leon back his knife," she said.



There was nothing wrong with Eddie's health that all the dough he could make off the local peasants wouldn't cure.

By **DAN GORDON**

LIGHT UP THE GRAVEYARD!

Eddie Albertson liked the mountain country around Mt. Fillmore fine. But to make it the kind of scenery Eddie really went for, it would need a couple of changes—say a roadhouse here, a neon sign there . . . and a corpse or two strewn around, just for color's sake!

EDDIE ALBERTSON coughed a little going up the grade of Mt. Fillmore. That was the change of altitude. The car, having but slightly less horsepower than a healthy locomotive, didn't cough at all. It bore Eddie smoothly to the tiny café on the road near the top of the mountain, squatted obediently at

the door. Eddie Albertson got out, coughed once more and stretched his legs.

The woman behind the counter was large and healthy and happy. Eddie pegged her at once as Eva Garden, but there were other things he needed to know, and so he boosted his diminutive frame to the top of a stool, mindful of the

crease in his nobly tailored slacks, and said, "Just coffee, please."

Eva Garden said, "It's fresh," and Eddie watched her competent hands making with the Silex.

Strictly a peasant. This babe was purely from the soil. So her old man dies and leaves her a chunk of land, and they build the Fillmore Observatory on the top of the hill, and suddenly she's sitting on a hunk of real estate worth maybe one hundred grand. Eddie said, very carefully, "This your own place?"

"Born and raised here." Clear brown eyes in a strong brown face. Good teeth, a pleasant smile.

"Business good?"

"Right fair, since they opened the observatory. I get a nice crowd on the weekends. Gets any better, I think maybe I'll put in a bar."

"Cost a lot," Eddie said doubtfully.

Eva Garden said, "Yeah, I guess."

It was better than he'd dared hope when he'd started down from L.A. Eddie thought with fleeting pity of his slow-witted brethren, of the chumpoes who schemed and sweated to turn a fast dollar in the big towns. And here he was, about to buy a fabulous piece of real estate from a country chick who hadn't the faintest notion what the stuff was really worth. You had to get out of the cities—out where the corn was green.

She was standing by the window, looking out through the sign that said cheeseburgers, admiring Eddie's car. She came back and sat in front of the counter with him, and he noticed that her movements were easy and graceful, despite her size. Take off twenty pounds or so, she'd be a nice-looking wren.

She said, "The kids down on the reservation would sure love to ride in that car. Their eyes would pop out of their heads."

"Reservation?" said Eddie.

Eva Garden said, "Indian kids. I drove the school bus last winter when business got kind of slack."

Eddie Albertson thought fleetingly of his upholstery, then said, "Why don't we take them for a ride? I'll be around for a couple of days."

Eva looked at him with those large brown eyes. She said, "Gee that's swell of you."

Eddie Albertson coughed.

IT WAS thirty miles to the bank, but he had become thoroughly familiar with the road in the two weeks he had been here, and now the car was coasting smoothly down the dangerous grades. Eva Garden was sitting beside him, one hand resting lightly on his arm.

She said, "I feel awful, Eddie, asking five thousand for half the place. But you offered ten for the whole thing and—"

"Forget it," Eddie said. "I know it's not worth it, but I didn't come down here to make money. I came down here for my health." He coughed by way of illustration and felt the sympathetic pressure of her fingers on his arm.

That health routine was a laugh. Let him figure a way to get complete control of that land, he'd throw up a resort that would leave these yokels gasping for breath. Signs and neon lights, enough of them to make a blaze in the sky. There was nothing wrong with his health that all that dough wouldn't cure. And the dough would come in, all right. He had it from official sources. Once the tourists started to flow, there'd be thirty thousand cars a month.

Eva said softly, "Eddie—you sorry we're partners? You seemed a little put out for a while . . ."

"No." Eddie twisted the wheel viciously, and the tires screamed on the curve. "No. It's nothing to me. I was trying to do you a favor. Ten thousand dollars would keep you. You wouldn't have to work any more."

"I won't mind it, Eddie. I was lonesome, but I'm going to like it now—now that I'm working with you. We'll get us some new signs made and post them along the road . . ."

"Sure." Some new signs. She was talking about those little tin jobs they scatter along the highways. Like you'd advertise a horse for sale, or maybe a general store. Eddie wanted to tell her about the neon, the floodlights he planned to put in. But she'd find out about those later—after he owned both halves. . . .

The banker knew Eva well. He was pleased when Eddie came up with five grand in cash, but a little country shyster, who said he was Eva's lawyer, said the place was worth more.

Eva said, "The money doesn't matter. Matter of fact, I wouldn't sell half inter-

est to no one but Eddie. My father homesteaded that place, you know, and I wouldn't be doing right by his memory if I let it go out of the family."

Eddie let his eyes slide sideways, saw the banker's understanding nod, heard the lawyer's grunt. The dust came in from the street, and it made him cough, and when he had finished coughing he heard his own voice saying, "I can understand how Miss Garden feels about that place up there. I think I'm good for quite a few years, but"—he paused and cleared his throat—"if something should happen to me, I'd like to have full title revert to Miss Garden again."

She said, as Eddie had hoped she would, "I think that's a good idea. Fix it that way then. If anything happens to either of us, the other gets the whole place."

There was no plan in Eddie's mind, as yet. He had never tampered with murder, and he wasn't thinking of murder now—not actively, that is. He was conscious only that things were going well, that he was doing all right. He smiled at the lawyer and said, "Tell you what. If you think five thousand is short, what say I throw in the car?"

"Fair enough," the lawyer said. "I'll make out a bill of sale."

It was done, and Eddie was alone with the lawyer and the banker. Eva was out on the town's dusty street, riding town urchins and gleeful Indian children up and down in the sedan.

Eddie winced, thinking of the car he had cherished, but he forced his mind away from that. He might as well get a little information as long as he was in town. "That café," he said casually, "is back off the road quite a ways. Maybe later we'll want to have power lines run in. Ought to be good for business if we can light up the joint."

The banker nodded agreeably. "You might do that," he said. "But you know about the restriction on lights? You'd have to consider that."

Eddie said, "What restriction?" and his voice was high and sharp.

"I believe," the lawyer said smoothly, "there's a prohibition of some sort—governing the area within five miles of the observatory. A great deal of light, you see, would interfere with their work."

"I can see that," Eddie said. But he hadn't seen that. All of his plans had depended upon making the place conspicuous. You couldn't make any dough with a resort—a night spot—hidden behind a bush.

Without lights, without a splash in the sky, Eva Garden's place was just another café. A good living, perhaps, with careful management. But Eddie wasn't interested in prosperous little eating places. That was for the suckers. Eddie was big-time dough.

And these yokels had taken him. Eva with her love for the old homestead, this banker who looked like a farmer, and a lawyer who didn't wear a coat—they had taken Eddie Albertson.

It made him sick just to think about it. He wouldn't mind being shaken down by a sharper, faster gang. But these peasants!

And he had five grand sunk in a roadside lunchroom. Plus a four-thousand-dollar car.

Eva brought the car in beside the curb, having dropped the kids down the street. Eddie walked out and climbed into it.

Eva said, "What's the matter, Eddie?"

"I don't feel so well."

HE FELT better later, thirty days later, when he knew what he had to do. He had felt himself slipping into the easy routine of the mountain life—drive down to town now and then, pick up a bunch of groceries, work around the place a little, then sit around in the evening and listen to Eva gab.

It wasn't for him, but he had trouble remembering that until he realized with sudden clarity that a man could dribble his life away sitting on top of this mountain. And be reasonably contented—if he didn't know any better. But not him. Not Eddie Albertson. He knew about the world where there weren't any restrictions on lights, and there were thin, fragile glasses, not coffee mugs, and the women wore low-cut gowns. . . .

But before he went back, he had to get right with himself. It wasn't a question of the five grand, or even his beloved car. Eddie's self-respect was involved, and until he got even with the bunch of hicks who had taken him to the cleaners he'd never feel right again.

Thinking about it, he saw only one big slip they'd made. The provision that the survivor inherit—that hadn't been smart of them. Eddie realized, with a little shock, that he was thinking of murder. He glanced back at Eva, there in the kitchen. She saw him watching her, and smiled. Eddie Albertson grinned a sickly grin and got up. He went outside.

The clouds were drifting in, and one or two went over his head, while the others brushed the side of the mountain, obscuring the tops of the pines that grew on the slope, blotting out the sight of the valley that lay at Eddie's feet.

Eddie breathed the damp mountain air, sucking it into his lungs, attempting to clear his head. It was freedom he was seeking—freedom and self-respect. He told himself that, at any rate, and kept his mind away from the grimly oppressive thought that came crowding in again.

Walking along, not thinking, he came to the place where the highway gang had been engaged in widening the road. There was a pair of bulldozers, a dump truck, and a pile of shovels and rakes neatly stacked on one side. Eddie walked to the edge and stood looking down the steep slope of shale that ended at a ledge.

Perhaps it was the fog, or only the confused and tormented state of his mind, but when Eva spoke behind him it was as if he had sent for her.

She said, "Eddie, what's the matter? Aren't you feeling well?"

"I feel all right," Eddie whispered. "I guess." She was coming closer now, and Eddie no longer had thoughts, but only blurred notions—unresolved images that refused to come into focus. It seemed to him that half of him was ready and eager

to shove Eva over the brink, while the other half kept reminding him that he really had grown quite fond of her. And though he had not yet turned to look, he knew well how clear her eyes were, and how she looked when she smiled.

That thought went away, leaving nothing in its place. Eddie turned, and turning, reached for her.

Eva Garden said sharply, "Eddie!"

There was the sound of rock and sand softly shifting as Eddie went over the edge.

He was riding a minor avalanche, and the rubble was rising about his knees. He slid another ten feet, twenty, feeling the terrible slow pressure as his body sank deeper. The rate of movement was slow. The slide moved a foot at a time, except for the impatient rocks that bounded over the surface and hurled themselves into the silence when they came to the ledge below.

When the terrifying grinding stopped, Eddie Albertson was buried neck deep, able to move his head, but expecting any moment to hear the soft grating noise that would send him over the ledge.

Eva called from above, "Eddie! Eddie—can you hear?"

Eddie opened his mouth but the sound wouldn't come. Eva didn't call again, but after a while a diesel engine roared into life somewhere up the road. Eddie twisted his head around as he heard the clanking tread of the bulldozer. When he saw the giant machine creep over the crest and start down the slope toward him, he got back his voice and screamed.

Eva's voice came shrilly above the thundering diesel, "Take it easy, Eddie."

(Continued on page 125)

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Friess got a blurred view of the man dropping past the ledge. Then he disappeared.

By
**ROY B.
FRENTZ**

THE LONG STEP

SNOW flurries blew down from the heights. When they whipped across the east ridge of the mountain, Friess dug his head into his parka and crouched on the rock. He wondered if he would make it safely back to the valley six thousand feet below. It didn't seem to matter a hell of a lot.

They had reached the summit two hours ago, Mack Session leading as usual. Session—there was a man. A big, egotistic

Rock by rock they crawled down that perilous mountainside, but always too slowly for Mack Session. Too slowly, that is, until someone accelerated the pace for him—to one thousand feet in ten deadly seconds!



athlete, with something a little inhuman about the way he balanced himself casually on the edge of a two-thousand-foot precipice or snaked his way up a knife-edge ridge. Or the way he treated Ruth, Friess thought bitterly.

Ruth was Mrs. Session.

Friess pulled his parka tighter over his thin shoulders. He saw Doc Antry and little Graymiller below him, scrambling over a steep slab like a pair of roaches. They moved with frantic haste. Friess lowered himself to the slab, started after them. It would take five hours to descend the ridge in good weather. That would make it about dark. Today, with wind and snow blasting at them . . . Friess shuddered.

He felt a tug on the climbing rope around his waist, glanced back. Ruth gestured at him. Her lips moved, but the words were swept away by the wind. She looked pitifully small up there, clinging to a narrow crack with fingers that were torn and bleeding.

He waited for her to cross the slab. Her husband, thirty feet behind, belayed her from above and she made it safely.

She sank down on the rock beside Friess, covered her face with her hands. "I—I can't go on," she sobbed.

FRIESS took a tighter hold on his ice axe and smiled bleakly. The words cut into him like daggers. If he couldn't live with Ruth, he could die with her. She was offering him that. "There's still a chance for—for us," he said softly.

Mack Session strolled across the slab. The big man stepped gracefully on the steep slope where the others had clung. "Come on. Move!" Mack Session snapped.

"Take it easy, Mack," Friess warned. "Remember, Ruth is—"

"Shut up," Session said. He grabbed the girl's hands, pulled them away from her face. "Get up," he ordered harshly.

Ruth's lips were tinged with blue. What little makeup she wore earlier had been pounded off by the driving wet snow. "I can't," she said.

Session slapped her. He grabbed Ruth and pushed her down the rock to start her off again.

Friess hefted his ice axe and moved to-

ward Session. "Damn you," he clipped.

Session glanced at him coolly. "Be smart, Friess," Session said. "She needed a shock. It's the only thing that would snap her out of it."

Friess looked down at his hands. The knuckles were white. Session's words made sense in a way. At least Ruth was moving again. "All right," Friess said.

Friess started down the ridge. Antry and Graymiller, fifty feet below, resumed their descent as the rope slackened. They were too anxious to get to safety, Friess decided, to take an interest in what Session did to Ruth. Thinking of their own skins.

He looked to the southwest for some break in the storm. A hundred yards out, snow and haze blanketed the view. For one awesome moment, he saw a black rock tower thrusting through the snow like a giant spike. It seemed to hang unsupported in the sky to the right, before mist swirled in and hid it.

He felt a faint numbness in his fingertips, first sign of frostbite. He shrugged and moved on. It would be warmer lower down. If they made it. An occasional faint tug on the rope told him that Ruth was following. She had a lot of pluck, Friess thought.

She hadn't wanted to come to the Rockies at all. Not after her brother, Sam Burke, was killed in a hit-and-run accident a couple of months ago when they were planning the trip. Burke was to have climbed with them. Once Ruth got to the mountains, she hadn't wanted to climb. Mack Session forced her. It was almost as if the man knew that death waited on the heights and wanted to lead her up to it. He'd murder her before he'd give her a divorce. And he'd insisted that Friess come on the climb.

Friess hadn't worried much. He figured that with Graymiller and Doc Antry along, Session wouldn't try anything, even if the big man suspected that his wife wanted a divorce so she could marry Friess.

Friess lowered himself to a slanting ledge. He found handholds in a crack at shoulder height and worked his way along the ledge. Another couple of thousand feet of this and they'd reach shelter at timberline. He thought he could hold out, if Ruth did.

The ledge ended after fifty feet. Doc Antry waited there. "Give you a nickel for our chances," he told Friess.

Friess couldn't see anything cheerful about it. Antry was a physician, a good one. But this was no place for a polished bedside manner. Friess said nothing and let Antry go ahead.

FRIESS found himself halfway down a gully and was not sure how he got there. Numbness seemed to be creeping into his brain. He caught a hazy glimpse of Doc Antry climbing on the main east ridge. Ruth was somewhere behind. Friess hadn't noticed her for a long time now.

He scrambled over to the ridge and slumped down. A couple of feet away, eyes closed, Rex Graymiller sprawled with his face to the sky. The tip of his hawk nose was white. Graymiller got to his feet when Friess touched him.

"Gettin' kind of tired," Graymiller said.

"Going to make it?" Friess asked.

"I'm doing all right. The worst is over."

Friess watched Graymiller inch ahead to a point where the rock dropped off into haze. "There's a ledge sixty feet below," Graymiller said. "Have to rappel down to it."

Doc Antry spoke. "No other way?"

"No," Graymiller said. He took a flat iron spike, pierced at the blunt end, from his pocket. Friess watched gratefully. It was easier to slide down a rappel rope than to pick your way down cracks and chimneys.

Graymiller carried a small hammer. He pounded the long spike into a crack, hitting hard, sure blows. The hammer thudded dully on the spike, like a mallet pounding on a rotten log. Graymiller jammed the spike in six inches, then hitched a rappel sling through the hole. Doc Antry handed him the quarter-inch rappel rope and Graymiller doubled it through the sling.

"Hold me on the climbing rope, Doc," Graymiller said. He folded the rappel rope under his left thigh, brought it back across his chest and over the right shoulder. He faced the sling, stepped backward over the precipice.

Friess watched him walk down the sheer wall, dancing down like a puppet on a string. Graymiller dropped out of sight as Ruth and Mack Session scrambled over to the belay position.

Ruth's face was dull. She sank to the rocks listlessly. Friess went to her, said, "Ruth, it isn't far now."

He glanced briefly at the side of her jacket, where she had ripped it somewhere above. A bit of white skin showed through the tear. Friess swore softly to himself. Ruth had always been neat and careful about her appearance.

Mack Session said, "We'll have to let Antry and Graymiller go ahead. We'll follow when Ruth gets her strength back."

"No!" Ruth Session burst out.

Friess nodded. This was what he was looking for. Session had finally picked his spot to leave them. They could never get down without help; only a man like Session could descend unaided. The big man would wait until Antry and Graymiller were beyond reach, then he would go down alone.

"We stick in one party," Friess said abruptly.

Before Session could stop him, he stepped to the rappel sling, looped the slack rope around his body. He said, "I'll be right below, Ruth. Yell if you need me."

Then he swung into space and dropped down the wall. The friction of the rope under his leg bit into him with its guarantee of safety. He kept himself almost horizontal to the rock and made it down to the ledge in a few seconds, where Doc Antry grabbed his arm and pulled him upright.

"Whew," Friess breathed. He leaned against the rock and looked cautiously around. He stood on a two-foot ledge that extended across the wall to the safe rock on the right. Below the ledge the wall continued straight down into the depths of a canyon.

"Ruth all right?" Doc Antry asked.

Friess glanced up. She was coming slowly down the doubled rope, moving inches at a time. In a minute she stood beside him.

"I hope that's the last rappel," she said wearily.

"It is," Doc Antry said.

Friess felt a whiplash on his leg, like the vicious snap of a bull whip. He jerked his head up, caught a quick glimpse of Mack Session at the crest of the wall with the doubled rope twisting under him. Friess couldn't tell why he felt suspicious. He grabbed for the rope, missed.

Mack Session peeled off the wall and fell into space. Friess got a blurred view of the man dropping past the ledge. The rope coiled after him and disappeared. Session did not cry out.

Friess closed his eyes. He waited for the thump of the body on the rocks below. There was no sound, except the whistle of the wind.

Then Ruth Session screamed, "Mack!"

Friess caught the girl, held her upright. He felt a shudder run through her. Over her shoulder he saw Doc Antry's face, mouth tight like a gash in a white tree trunk. Little Rex Graymiller, a few feet beyond, peered dumbly over the ledge.

Antry snapped, "Who did it, Friess? You or the girl?"

"You—you think . . ." Friess gasped. He dropped his arms from Ruth. It was an accident, he knew. He hadn't loosened the piton spike or untied the rappel sling. It had to be one of those that gave way and hurled Session over the precipice. It had to be an accident. That was the only answer.

Antry glared at him. "Four of us came down the rope. Why should it break loose when Session started down?"

Friess studied the man for several seconds, then shook his head. "I don't know, Antry," he said. He didn't know. But he had had a hunch that Session would fall. He'd seen something, or heard something, but he couldn't remember what it was.

Something that made him grab for the rope at the last possible instant, and miss.

Friess said, "We'd better get down to him. He may not be dead."

"Yeah," Rex Graymiller said. "He only dropped five hundred feet onto rocks."

"I wouldn't—wouldn't kill him," Ruth said.

"All right," Friess said quickly. The girl was near collapse and he knew the first thing was to get her off the ridge safely. Then they could find what was left of Mack Session. "You lead, Graymiller," he ordered. "I'll anchor."

Doc Antry started to say something but cut it off. Graymiller edged over to the ridge and started down. Friess tied Ruth into the climbing rope and guided her off the ledge. He didn't let himself think too much about what had happened.

FRIESS stumbled into the edge of pine brush an hour later. The others waited there. This was safety, Friess knew. Safety? It wasn't important to him now. Not until he knew what Ruth had done.

Graymiller said, "We got to find Session right now."

"Impossible," Antry said. "You'd die, too. You'd blunder off a cliff somewhere in the dark."

That was true, Friess thought. Darkness had overtaken them on the lower ridge and Session's body would be lost in a maze of rock and snow. But it occurred to him that Antry didn't seem very anxious to go after Session. The two had been on bad terms for months, since Session's brokerage house had failed and taken most of Antry's investments with it.

"A rescue party, of course," Friess

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said. "One with lights, a stretcher and fresh men. We can't do more." Even as he spoke he knew that shock and exposure, if Session had survived the fall, might kill the man before many hours passed. Antry, a physician, must know that. "We can get help in the valley," he said.

Graymiller said, "That's okay." He started off.

Friess let Ruth go ahead of him. He could hear Graymiller and Antry crashing through the brush and he followed the sound. Pine branches scraped his face occasionally and his ankles began to hurt from the downhill pounding. Ruth was near, but he stayed away from her. He was changing his mind about her. He knew it. Friess considered himself a thoughtful, scrupulous man, slow to make decisions but rigid in his beliefs once he had made up his mind. He fought against a too-quick decision. He'd have to talk to Ruth in private.

When they hit a trail that led in easy switchbacks to the valley, Friess estimated that it was near midnight. He walked faster, eased past Ruth without speaking. She didn't seem to notice him, and he guessed that she was too far gone to do anything but plug along. His own legs wobbled under him. He saw a light far ahead, knew it for the Blacktail Lake store, and forced an extra ounce of energy out of his legs.

Friess reached the store, pounded on a shuttered door. Graymiller came up, but Doc Antry and Ruth lagged farther behind. Friess pounded again.

"What is it?" someone called from inside. The door opened.

Friess recognized the man who peered out. It was Paul Duford, sleepy eyed, standing barefoot in flannel shirt and blue denim pants. "Accident on the east ridge," Friess blurted. "Mack Session fell from a rappel. We couldn't get down to him, had to leave him on the mountain. Need a rescue party."

Duford blinked stupidly. He wasn't usually sluggish, Friess knew. Duford was an expert mountaineer himself. He operated the Blacktail store as an excuse to be near the mountains after his retirement from an eastern law practice. He acted as deputy sheriff here.

"Come in," Duford said. He threw the door wide open, moved swiftly to a side room. In a few moments he returned with nailed boots and heavy jacket. "Let's have it," Duford said.

Friess told him.

"Four of you went down the rope, then Session fell?" Duford asked.

Friess glanced at Graymiller, saw that the little man was not going to say anything. "That's right," Friess admitted. "But Session was fifty pounds heavier than any of the rest of us. His weight could have snapped the rope where we went down safely." Even as he spoke he knew Duford wasn't fooled. Duford had sold them the rappel rope. The manila rated at over a ton breaking strength.

"I'll rouse the camp," Duford decided. He finished lacing his boots, said, "Any of you in condition to take us up?"

Friess wanted to laugh. He'd been on his feet for twenty hours in high altitude, doing the hardest kind of physical work. He was through. He could feel the ache in his legs, the leaden tiredness of muscles. "I've told you where he fell," Friess said. "You can find him."

Duford nodded. "I guess so," he said. He found a frame pack-sack in a cabinet and adjusted it on his shoulders. "I keep my equipment ready for these things," he said. He gestured Friess and Graymiller to the door and followed them out.

Friess walked to the tents in a pine grove near the lake. Duford went ahead, shook out a man from an umbrella tent. Friess watched wearily for a moment as Duford went from tent to tent; then he turned toward the canvas that he shared with Antry and Graymiller. The Session tent was pitched a few feet away. Friess heard a low muffled sobbing from it. He had to go there. He knew it. Whatever Ruth had done, he still loved her.

He pushed aside the tent flap and stepped in. "Ruth," he said, "forget the guy. He wasn't worth crying over."

Darkness hid the girl's face, but he could see a dim outline of her figure at one side of the tent.

"It isn't that," Ruth said. "You—you think I killed him."

"No," Friess said instantly. He tried to throw the thought out of his mind. Ruth wouldn't murder. Of course she

wouldn't. She didn't have the temperament for it.

"It was an accident," Friess said. For a minute he almost believed it. Then he remembered that something had been wrong up there. It eluded him. He could sense it, but he couldn't pin it down. It wasn't the girl; it was something he had done himself up on the mountain.

"Ruth," he said, "did you notice anything up there? Anything out of the ordinary?"

"No."

Friess thought for a moment. No use. He couldn't remember. "I guess I still love you, Ruth," he said.

The girl didn't say anything.

Friess waited, then said. "All right. You need sleep. We'll talk in the morning." He walked out of the tent, crossed to his own and slid into his sleeping bag.

SOMEONE shook him roughly. Friess blinked his eyes a couple of times and came awake. He saw Doc Antry. "They want us up there," Antry said.

Across the tent Graymiller yanked a boot on his right foot. "I'm going," he grumbled, "but I don't like it. Duford shoulda found Session by now. He don't need us to show him."

Friess agreed. "Maybe Duford found him," he suggested. "Maybe there's something about the accident that Duford wants to show us." He crawled out of the sleeping bag and flexed his leg muscles. They were stiff. "Do we take Ruth along?" he asked.

"No," Antry said. "They don't want her."

Friess nodded. The girl would be physically incapable of going up again. Friess wasn't sure he could make it himself. But he laced on his boots and slipped into a parka. He stuffed rope and a package of chocolate in his packsack and heaved it to his shoulder.

Friess stepped out of the tent. The peak of the mountain was wrapped in orange light, like a vast beacon thrusting straight up into the sky. No clouds hung about it. It would be a bright day. Friess followed Antry and Graymiller to the shore of the lake where a trail led up the mountain. Little needles seemed to jab his muscles and he clamped his lips tight. He

thought that the pain and stiffness would vanish after a while.

When they reached timberline Friess looked at the long, jagged ridge that rose above them. It didn't seem possible that they had come down this ridge last night. Graymiller started to climb it.

"Not that way," Antry said. "Over there." He pointed off to the right where a gash between two ridges formed a deep canyon.

Friess said, "Graymiller is right, Doc. We can make better time on the ridge. The canyon's a solid boulder field."

Antry frowned, "I don't like it," he growled.

Friess dug out his rope and tossed a coil to Graymiller. "Think you can hold me if I fall?" he asked.

"Hell, yes," Graymiller said.

Friess grinned. He considered himself a better climber than Graymiller, and the little man knew it.

Antry snapped, "Tie me in."

Friess did so, then followed Graymiller up the ridge. Graymiller led at a good pace on the first easy pitches. He came to the series of rock steps, and stopped. "This is about it," he said.

Friess looked. A few tiny specks moved about on a snowfield to the right, high in the canyon and almost level with where Friess stood. "High enough," Friess said. "We can cross over from here." He saw a series of sloping slabs that led toward the canyon, ending in a ledge and a short drop to the canyon floor.

Graymiller led over the slabs to the ledge. He stopped there. Friess followed carefully. It would be impossible to return this way, he knew. The slabs inclined sharply downward with few handholds. But a short rappel from the ledge would put them safely on the canyon floor.

The specks on the snowfield were nearer now. Friess saw two of them moving toward him fast. He called to Graymiller, "Let's get down there quick. Something's happened."

Graymiller, kneeling on the ledge to untie the rope around his stomach, grinned at Friess. "Go ahead," he said.

Friess glanced down. The ledge broke off into a fifty-foot wall. "Get a piton in," he ordered impatiently. He cut a rappel

slung and tossed it over to Graymiller.

Graymiller found a piton spike in a pocket. He headed it into a crack.

Friess felt an elbow jab his back. He teetered on the ledge, caught his balance.

"Sorry," Doc Antry said.

Friess shut his eyes. "For the love of God," he said. "You could push me off."

"I'm sorry," Antry repeated.

Friess backed angrily a couple of steps. "Well, watch it," he said.

And then Friess heard it. The singing clink of metal. It was a high-pitched musical sound like a boy beating a toy anvil.

FRIESS knew what it was. He looked for a small rock to fit his hand, found nothing. He saw Graymiller tap the piton spike. The piton, hit, squealed as it drove into rock. *The piton from which Session fell had gone into the rock sog-gily also.* Friess' mouth was dry.

"Graymiller," he said, "you killed Ses-sion."

Graymiller shook his head. "Uh-uh," he said.

"Up on that high wall," Friess went on, "you put a piton into rotten rock. It didn't sing the way a spike does when it goes into a firm, solid crack. You knew Session's weight would pull the spike loose and that he'd fall to his death."

"I don't get it," Doc Antry said.

"I thought something was wrong up there, but I couldn't remember what," Friess said. "Now I know. The piton didn't sing. Graymiller wasn't worried about killing anyone else. The rest of us were held from above on the climbing rope. If the piton had pulled out on any one of us, we would have been safe. Only Session, unsupported from above, could be hurt. And he was killed. He weighed fifty pounds more than any of us and Graymiller figured on that to pull the piton loose.

Graymiller watched Friess like a cornered panther. His eyes darted down to the canyon below, then back to the ledge. Friess stared at him in horror. There was no question about it. The murder was plain. Any mountaineer would know it. Graymiller knew it too.

Graymiller waved his hammer at Friess.

"So I killed the blackmailing louse," he snarled. "He had it coming. He was bleeding me to death over that Burke accident. He and I were drunk when I hit Sam Burke with my car. We kept on going. Next day he said it meant a prison term for me if he turned me in to the cops. I had to pay Session off, until last night. Then I paid him good."

Friess felt a queer sense of relief. He moved a couple of steps toward Graymiller and the little man backed away. "Get back," Graymiller said.

Friess knelt swiftly and he was over the piton, concealing it from Graymiller. "You should have reported the accident," he said. He wanted to keep Graymiller talking while he worked at the piton behind his back.

Graymiller licked his lips. "I was drunk," he said.

Friess worked fast. He hitched the rap-pel rope to the piton and pitched it over the cliff. "Get down, Doc," he mumbled. He was aware that Antry had moved in behind him. Antry dropped down the rope. Friess glanced quickly down, saw Antry halfway to the canyon floor.

Graymiller yelled something, came charging forward.

Friess grabbed the rope and swung himself over the edge. He couldn't wait for Antry to get off the rope. It would have to hold two men.

Above Graymiller yelled, "Wait!"

Friess dropped fast. The rope jerked in his hands. He heard the chop of metal on rock. Graymiller was hacking with his hammer at the rope above. Friess slid faster.

The rope slackened. He crashed to the rocks. Antry came to him, ran quick hands over Friess' arms and legs.

Friess staggered to his feet. He was shocked and bruised and thankful. Thankful that he had nearly reached the bottom when Graymiller snapped the rope. He glanced up, saw Graymiller peering at him. "He'll keep," Friess said. "He can't go up, and to get down without rope he'd have to jump."

Antry walked up the canyon. "I'll get Duford," he said.

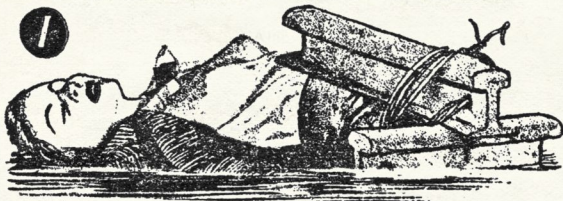
Friess nodded. He had a job of his own to do. He wanted to get to Ruth.

ODDITIES IN CRIME

By MAYAN and JAKOBSSON

1. Doctors don't get away with murder—no one knows quite why. For example, the doctor who cut up his wife's body to prevent identification and tossed it into the river—in a burlap sack upon which was printed his name and address.

More recent is the case of Louisiana's Dr. Thomas E. Dreher, who fell in love with the wife of one of his patients, and promptly disposed of the patient. He weighted the body with enough scrap to sink a submarine and threw it into Lake Palourde. The body stayed down all right, but the lake didn't stay up. The doctor had picked a flood tide, and when the waters ebbed, the corpse had its vengeance!



3. Add strange penalties: The sentence passed on Miss Barbara Ernst by a Pennsylvania court, forbidding her ever again to play on her marimba JINGLE BELLS, LITTLE OLD LADY, ANCHORS AWEIGH, or WHEN IRISH EYES ARE SMILING.

Her accusers were a bearded man, an elderly gentlewoman, a naval officer, and a Kelly. Justice ruled that Miss Ernst, by making them march to their theme songs down their own street, was driving them to certain madness and eventual death. Hence, the life sentence against her favorite tunes.



4. The Baumes Law of New York State, which takes a fourth offender out of circulation for life, no matter what the nature of his felony, may or not be based on the happy experience of lawmakers in far-off Saudi Arabia. There, too, we are told, a fifth conviction for larceny is never necessary.

According to Arab law, a convicted thief pays with the loss of a hand, but is set free. Next theft—another hand. No statistics are available on toes, should a thief be that set on his calling, but legally, they would go next.

Beheading is the penalty for murder—and murder only.



2. The free-loadingest couple in American crime has at last been identified. Working as a team, this pair has lifted the staggering sum of some fifty million dollars worth of plate, china and linen in the past twenty years, according to the Inter-Hotel Protection Bureau.

Fortunately—or unfortunately, depending on who you are—the pair is not likely to be prosecuted, or even pressed for return of the loot. They are well liked, probably have two children by now, hard-working...

They are any pair who ever have been on a honeymoon. Honeymooners, hotel men say, are the nation's worst offenders at helping themselves to the hotel's supplies. However, it is added in their favor, one thing they have never been guilty of stealing, is a Gideon Bible.



• ONE TOUCH

*Morgan's system for getting out of a murder rap was simple:
First you work over the detective the Old Man has sent to tail
you—and then you beat up the Old Man himself!*

Morgan brought a desperate left from the floor to Crocker's chin. It was now or never.



OF ARSENIC.

Dynamic Crime-Detective Novelette

By CHARLES LARSON

CHAPTER ONE

Candidate for the Rap

MORGAN shoved the plainclothesman into the elevator and snapped, "Four," when the operator glanced at him.

"Four," the operator said. He was an old man, with the bright, curious face of a sparrow. He pulled his lever back, staring at Morgan out of the corner of his eye. As the elevator rose, the plainclothesman, a tall, light-haired Swede, said thickly, "I think you busted something."

"If I didn't," Morgan said, "I'm going

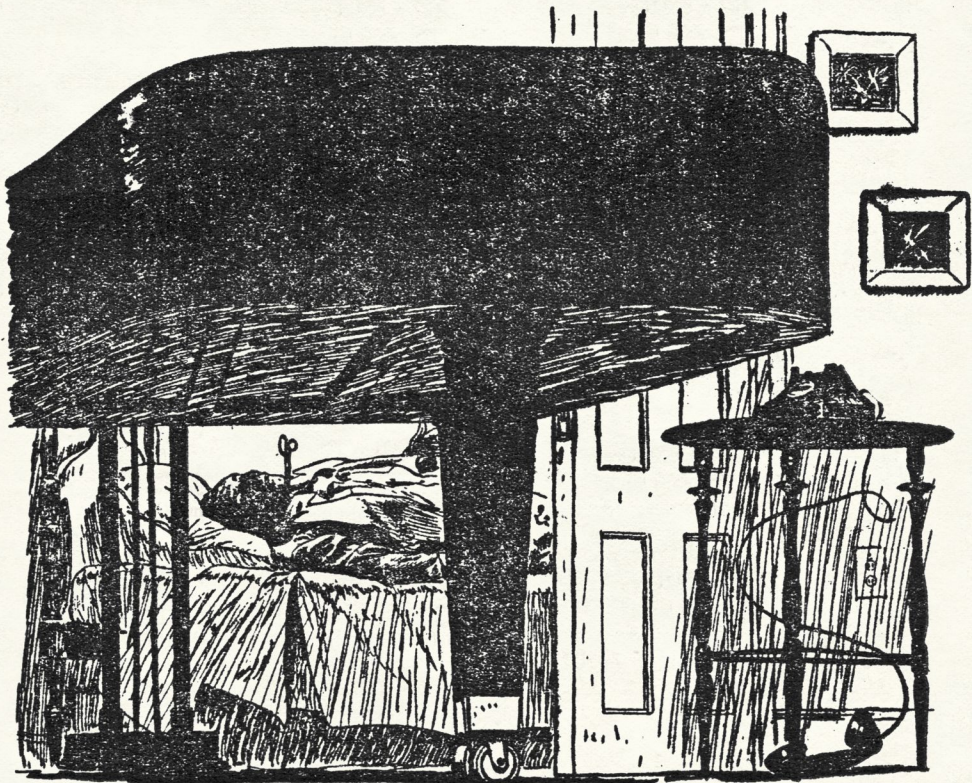
to sue the hell out of my gym instructor."

"It's bleedin' again," the Swede said. He rubbed his hand across his battered nose and looked at his fingers.

The elevator stopped, and Morgan pushed the other into the hall. "Let's go."

They crossed to a glass-paneled door marked: E. F. CROCKER. CAPTAIN OF DETECTIVES. PRIVATE. Morgan turned the knob, kicked the door open and thrust the Swede in ahead of him.

Stumbling, the Swede caught himself



on the battle-scarred oaken desk. Morgan slammed the door shut. "Hello, Crocker," he said. "Look what I found. Is it yours?"

Very slowly the man behind the desk put down the sheaf of papers he'd been studying. He was small and grey—grey eyes, grey hair, grey skin. His face had the tightness and the pain that has lived long and unromantically with ulcers. His eyes flicked over the plainclothesman. Then he said softly, "Well, if it isn't Jack Armstrong, the all-American detective. Welcome home."

Clearing his throat, the Swede said, "Tell you how it happened, Captain. I—"

"Beat it," Crocker said.

The Swede wiped his nose again. "Don't you want to hear my side of it?"

"I can hardly wait," Crocker murmured, "but I'll force myself to do without it. Beat it."

The Swede closed his mouth, turned and limped out. Crocker watched unemotionally until the door had closed behind him. Then he swung his chill eyes to Morgan.

"Some day you're going to go too far, knocking my boys around, Morgan. Some day I might take offense."

"I'm scared to death," Morgan said. He pulled a police revolver out of his pocket, tossed it on the desk. "Sonny Boy dropped this in the scuffle. I'm surprised at you, Crocker, letting your girls carry firearms. Dangerous."

Crocker glanced at the gun, not touching it. "All right, shamus," he said. "You've had your fun. Now what's the gag?"

MORGAN smiled, without warmth and without humor. "You ought to know better than to put a tail on me. Especially one as bad as Sonny Boy. He stuck out like a sore thumb."

"How'd you spot him?"

"Spot him! It was all I could do to keep him from crowding me off the sidewalk."

Coldly, Crocker swung around in his chair to face the window. "Sometimes," he murmured, "I wish you were working for the department, Morgan. You're crude, but you're willing. You got a kind of stupid cunning that intrigues me."

"I love you, too," Morgan said. He pushed his brown felt hat back on his head and sat on the edge of the desk—a lean, dark, loose man with the body of a conditioned fighter and the quick grace of a smart dancer. He got a cigarette out of a crumpled pack and offered it to Crocker.

Crocker shook his head. "With my ulcers?" he said.

Morgan lit the cigarette and gazed at Crocker over his cupped hands. "I'm still wondering why you had me shadowed. Or do your girls need the practice?"

Crocker looked at him for a long time. Then, quietly, he said, "All right. As long as you're here . . ."

He picked up the sheaf of papers he'd been studying. "About six months ago," he said, "you had a case concerning a missing person. I don't know why they'd give it to a private eye instead of the police, but they did. Girl named Holly Swann. Remember it?"

Morgan blew out his match slowly. "I remember."

"You were on it for about two weeks."

"That's right."

"Why'd you drop it?"

Morgan frowned, watching Crocker carefully. "They called me off," he said. "Why?"

"No reasons."

"Weren't you curious?"

"Who knows why a client does anything?" Morgan said. "Or cares? I don't—"

"What'd they pay you?"

"Now, look . . ."

Crocker raised his eyes slowly. "What'd they pay you, Morgan?" he repeated.

"My straight fee. A hundred."

"Umm." Crocker sat back in his chair, thumbing through the papers. A fly buzzed somewhere in the room, lazily, like the sound summer makes. Through the open window, Morgan could hear the noon noises of Los Angeles. The rattle of a street car. The hoarseness of a newsboy. The squealing of Los Angeles brakes at Los Angeles pedestrians. He tapped his cigarette against the edge of a crystal ash-tray on Crocker's desk and felt, distantly, the perspiration forming on his palms.

At last Crocker dropped the papers. "Holly Swann," he said. "Five feet six

inches. One hundred and eighteen pounds. Blue eyes. Blonde hair. Twenty-seven years old. When last seen was wearing gold sandals, a white tennis outfit, dark blue coat. Right?"

"Close enough."

"We found her," Crocker said.

Morgan snubbed his cigarette out. "What am I supposed to do now?" he asked. "Clap my hands and scream goody?"

"Somebody stumbled over her while they were wading at Long Beach," Crocker said softly. "She'd been dead for about five months. There wasn't much left, but we got an identification."

Morgan whistled tonelessly, his eyes half closed.

Leaning back, Crocker clasped his hands behind his head. "She had three slugs in her spine," he said. "Ballistics came through with the report last night. She was shot with a .38 belly gun."

Again Morgan felt the perspiration tickling his palms. "So?" he said.

CROCKER closed his eyes. "What kind of a gun you got, Morgan?" he whispered.

Silently Morgan opened his coat, pulled his automatic out of its harness. He laid it on the desk. A .32.

Without moving, Crocker said; "We looked up your license. You bought this one last month. Before that—"

"Before that," Morgan interrupted, "I had a .38 belly gun. All right, Sherlock. Hang me."

Crocker waited patiently. Then he said, "What happened to it?"

"I was robbed. I turned in the report."

"You were robbed," Crocker said flatly. Slowly Morgan stood up. "What are you trying to pull? There must be a thousand rods like that in this town."

With gentle surprise, Crocker spread his hands wide. "Routine, Morgan," he said. "Just routine. Don't get excited." He smiled, staring at the other.

"You're wasting your time."

"Sure."

Morgan retrieved his gun, stuck it in its holster. "May I ask what my motive was? Or haven't you framed that yet?"

"The girl," Crocker said dreamily, "was worth a fortune. But there wasn't a dime in her purse. Maybe she never carried any dough with her. But I doubt it."

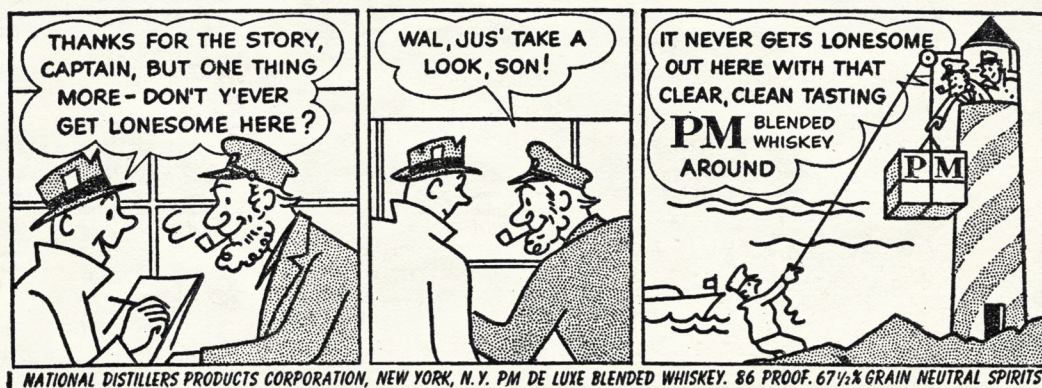
"I don't follow you."

"Maybe," Crocker continued as though he were talking to himself, "you're a better detective than I think you are. Maybe you found the girl. Maybe she was loaded. Maybe she was hauling more than the century they were paying you to look for her. Maybe—"

Morgan began to chuckle quietly. "I thought smoking hurt your ulcers," he said. "Better lay off those reefers, Crocker."

The captain's thin lips split in a smile. "Yeah," he murmured. "Fantastic, isn't it? You wouldn't hurt a fly, would you, Morgan? Clean as the newly driven snow . . ."

"If you try to hold me on that pipe-dream," Morgan said softly, "I'll slap a defamation of character and false-arrest suit on you so hard it'll make your eyeballs twirl." He walked to the door, turned with his hand on the knob. "And



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next time you put a tail on me, you might tell him not to follow his man up a dark alley."

"I'll do that," Crocker said pleasantly.

When Morgan left the office, Crocker's cold, patient eyes were still fixed unblinkingly on him. Frowning, Morgan walked slowly to the elevator, pressed the down button. The Swann case. He hadn't liked it when Frederick Swann had hired him. He hadn't wanted to touch it. But he'd needed the money, and he'd disregarded his hunches. And now the girl was dead, and Crocker was mixed up in it. A good cop, Crocker. Born with the low intelligence of a bulldog and a bulldog's blind teeth-in-the-throat tenacity. Morgan had watched him work too often not to be able to see the pattern. He'd grab a theory, any theory, and hang on until he died—or until a better theory came to his jaundiced attention.

The elevator doors wheezed open, and Morgan stepped inside. He leaned against the back wall, trying to think. Certainly Crocker wouldn't move until he had something more than the flimsy case he'd outlined in his office. He'd sit like a sick spider, waiting, waiting, waiting. And when he thought he had enough evidence—circumstantial in this instance, since Morgan had never even seen the girl—he'd jump. And Morgan would be facing a jury of his peers, and no man born of woman could tell what a jury might do, ever.

Whistling thoughtfully, Morgan left the elevator at the ground floor.

Ten minutes later he was driving toward Hollywood and the main offices of the Bank of Southern California.

CHAPTER TWO

A Favor for Holly

THE GIRL in the anteroom was neat and remote and very, very lovely. Her dark hair curled like duck feathers at the nape of her neck. She wore a sweater so distracting that Morgan found it hard to concentrate on anything so sordid as murder. He watched the movement of her mouth as she spoke into the intercom phone, and he found it charming beyond belief.

"A Mr. Morgan to see you, Mr. Swann," the girl said. She doodled on a paper before her, not looking at him. "Something to do with Holly. Yes, sir . . ." She listened quietly, continuing to doodle. At last she murmured, "Yes, sir," once more, put the phone down and nodded toward Morgan. "He'll see you now."

Morgan rose, smiling at her. "Fine."

The girl flushed under his gaze and swung toward her typewriter. She sat stiffly, outraged by his penetrating glance—and pleased by his male admiration.

Morgan grinned and went on into Frederick Swann's office.

Swann was standing by a window, his hands behind his back, staring into the street below him. He turned at the sound of the opening door. He was big and solid, and as tastefully decorated as his office. The eyes beneath the silver brows were blue as ice, deep, withdrawn, inaccessible. Nodding, he said, "Well, Morgan, we meet again."

"Hello, Mr. Swann."

Swann indicated a leather chair opposite his desk. "Sit down, sit down."

"Thanks."

The banker walked to his own seat, pushed a humidior forward. Morgan shook his head, and Swann picked out a cigar for himself. He sniffed it, watching the detective. "What can I do for you?"

"I . . . heard about your sister-in-law," Morgan said.

Silently Swann removed the end of his cigar with a silver pen-knife. "Yes," he said finally. "Terrible thing. So young. Such a pretty girl." His voice was devoid of emotion.

"Must have come as quite a shock."

"All of us," Swann said slowly, "were most upset. Naturally."

"Naturally," Morgan said.

Pinkness rose in the banker's well-barbered cheeks. He lifted one eyebrow. "The meaning of your tone," he said, "escapes me. In any case, I don't care for it."

Morgan got a book of matches out of his pocket, struck one and leaned across the desk with it. He moved the flame expertly beneath Swann's cigar. "My tones never have any meaning, Mr. Swann. Maybe I'm just a little nervous today."

He sat back, blowing out the match. "They're trying to pin your sister-in-law's murder on me."

Swann jerked his head up. "On you!" he said incredulously.

"The police are all upset because I couldn't tell 'em why you had me stop looking for the girl."

"Ah," Swann said softly. He stared at the glowing end of his cigar. "Yes, of course, they would be. They asked me the same thing."

"They've been around, then?"

"Yesterday afternoon. A man named Crocker came by. He—I didn't like him. He was quite rude."

Again Morgan chuckled dryly.

"You know him?" Swann asked.

"I know him."

Swann got out of his chair, walked slowly to the window. "You've got to understand my position," he said. He sounded querulous suddenly, vaguely persecuted. "As a banker, I have a certain dignity to uphold. All of this . . . The scandal . . . It's regrettable—very, very regrettable. I want to do everything I can, of course, but the fact is—"

"The fact is," Morgan said, "that your dignity isn't anywhere near as close to my heart as my own freedom. And I'm not going to quibble about the relative importance of the two of them. I still want to know, Mr. Swann, why you called me off the case."

Swann sighed and pressed the bridge of his nose. "Are all detectives rude?" he murmured.

"We learn it in the cradle," Morgan said.

"I can believe it." Swann shrugged wearily. "Well," he said, "I suppose I might as well tell you. I don't see how the scandal can get any worse." He put one hand in his pocket, jingling a few coins, and continued to gaze out the window. "I dismissed you, Morgan, because I heard from Holly. She telephoned me a few days after I'd hired you. And when I heard *why* she'd disappeared, I managed to convince my brother—Holly's husband—that the wisest thing would be to forget her entirely. She was no longer a missing person. She had simply run away from my brother, and she did not choose to return. An awkward, disgraceful situa-

tion, Morgan, but our hands were tied."

MORGAN was watching the banker narrowly. "Infidelity rearing its ugly head?"

"Exactly." Swann seemed beaten, ashamed. "I pleaded with her to come to her senses. I reminded her of the family, of my position. She wouldn't listen. She was a cheap, vicious young woman, and I'm not surprised at her end. Shocked, but not surprised. Family meant nothing to her. The name she bore, thanks to my brother, apparently meant even less. She chose to throw it all away on some . . ." He stopped.

"Yes?" Morgan whispered. "On whom, Mr. Swann?"

A shutter clicked down over Swann's eyes as surely as though he'd pulled a mask over them. "I . . . don't know."

Morgan sat up, incredulous. "You don't *know*!"

Coldly Swann murmured, "On some truck driver, I was about to say. The identity of the man hardly seemed important. The issue was not that she had sinned, but that she had been willing to drag the name of Swann through the mud. We told our friends that she had gone east to visit some of her college chums. Eventually—with as much dignity as possible—my brother intended to get a divorce on charge of desertion."

"Ah," Morgan murmured, "we're back to dignity again."

"I beg your pardon?"

"Forget it," Morgan said and sighed. He felt tired and old and unhappy. "Look . . ." he began, and at that moment the door behind him opened. He turned in his chair. It was Swann's secretary.

"I'm sorry . . ." she said.

Swann looked up irritably. "Well?"

"It's your brother Todd, Mr. Swann. He's outside now. I told him you were busy, but—"

"Later," Swann snapped. "Have him wait."

"Yes, sir." The girl slipped out of the room.

Morgan raised his eyebrows. "The bereaved husband?" he asked.

Swann nodded.

Grunting, Morgan slapped the arms of his chair lightly and stood up. "Far be it

from me to hold up a family conference," he said. "Thanks for the information, anyway." He pulled the brim of his hat down and turned toward the door. "Give your brother all my sympathy in his time of sorrow."

Swann stared poisonously after him. "I shall."

Morgan laughed and left the office.

As he stepped into the anteroom, a willowy, sallow-cheeked man of forty-odd straightened hurriedly from the desk he'd been bending over and glared at his fingernails. The secretary was staring stonily at her typewriter, her face crimson. Morgan grinned.

Without looking at him, the secretary said, "All right, Mr. Swann. You may go in now."

The sallow man cleared his throat. "Yes. Yes. Thank you." He cleared his throat once more and disappeared importantly into his brother's office.

Still grinning, Morgan approached the desk. "Should I have knocked?" he asked.

"What you *should* do," the secretary answered, "is mind your own business." She whirled away from him and began to type furiously.

"Detectives," Morgan said over the clatter, "never mind their own business."

The girl stopped, her hands still poised over the typewriter keyboard. "Detectives?" she said finally.

Morgan got out a notebook and uncapped his pen. "What's your name, sister?"

The girl looked at him, wide-eyed.

"Official business," Morgan said.

"Why—it's Lewis. Linda Lewis."

"Mrs.?"

"Miss."

"Address?"

"6200 De Longpre. Hollywood."

"Telephone number?"

The girl put her head on one side, regarding him narrowly. "What kind of business did you say this was?" she said.

"Telephone number?" Morgan repeated sternly.

"Hollywood 8646."

Morgan nodded, put the notebook away.

"I don't understand," Linda said. "Why should a detective be interested in me?"

Morgan tried as hard as he could to

keep his eyes off her silken knees. "The reasons," he said, "ought to be obvious."

"They're not."

Sighing, Morgan dragged his mind back to the case at hand. "All right," he said, "let's take up the question of Mr. Todd Swann. For a man who's just had his wife murdered—"

Flushing, the girl said, "I suppose you're referring to that little scene you think you interrupted."

"I suppose I am."

"And again it's none of your business. Sometimes Mr. Swann . . . forgets himself. I only work here."

Morgan decided to try another tack. "What about the wife?" he asked. "You knew her?"

"Holly?" Linda said. "Yes. I knew her. Slightly."

"Like her?"

"Nobody liked her." Linda kept her eyes on her desk. "She was . . . I don't know. Haughty. And yet cheap. Oh, such big airs. La-de-da. But underneath she was pure Jersey City. I think Mr. Swann was glad when she left him. They never loved each other."

"Why didn't they get a divorce?"

LINDA smiled cynically. "Listen, mister, Mrs. Swann may have been cheap, but she wasn't insane. As long as her husband had five cents, you couldn't have pried her loose with a crowbar. The only thing she loved better than herself was money. And Todd Swann is filthy with the stuff. Not as much as his brother, maybe, but—"

Frowning, Morgan said, "And yet she did leave. Why?"

Linda shrugged. "Maybe she found somebody with a little more."

"You don't think," Morgan put in carefully, "that she'd run off with—oh, say, a truck driver?"

"A *truck* driver! Holly? Not unless the truck he drove came straight from Fort Knox. I can just hear her . . ." The girl put one hand to her hair in the Grand Manner and dropped her voice two sultry octaves. "I met the most dahlhing little truck drivah, deah. Not much to look at, but he owns two erl wells."

She stopped suddenly and shook her head. "That wasn't very nice, was it?"

And yet that's just exactly the way she sounds." She shuddered. "Or used to sound. It's hard to believe she's dead. Even now."

"Murder's always hard to believe," Morgan said.

The girl nodded. "Such a terrible word. No one should ever have to die the way Mrs. Swann did. Writhing. Screaming. Fighting. Death ought to be quiet and quick, in a soft bed, when you're very, very old."

"Sure," Morgan said, "and taxes should run around a nickel a year. But they don't."

Again Linda shuddered. "It's getting so no one's safe. I've become an awful coward since Mrs. Swann was . . . killed. I even bought a canary, just to have some company around the house. Maybe they'll never find out who did it. Maybe it was just some man—out of the night."

"Possible," Morgan admitted.

"I don't know. I hate to walk home alone any more. When I was fourteen, my father took a job in the Philippines. He died over there. Malaria. I picked up a touch of it, too. I can still remember the nightmares I used to have. I've had the same feeling lately—as though something were after me. Todd offered to lend me his gun, but—"

Morgan jerked his head around so sharply he heard his neck crack. "Gun?" he said.

Puzzled, Linda stared at him. "What's—did I say something wrong?"

"What kind of a gun?" Morgan was leaning over the desk intently.

Angrily the girl said, "I think you're terrible. Coming around, asking all these

silly questions, suspecting everybody."

"I'm a beast," Morgan said. "What kind of a gun?"

"You can just get out of here," Linda said. She pointed toward the door. "Go on! Get out!"

Morgan sighed and rubbed a hand over his eyes. "So pretty," he murmured, "but such a temper."

"Do I have to call a guard?" Linda snapped.

Morgan got to his feet, watching her quizzically, enchanted by the anger flashing in the girl's eyes. "I don't suppose," he said, "that you'd care to have dinner with me tonight? I mix a mean salad."

"Why, of all the—" The girl spluttered helplessly.

Morgan stepped out into the hall, chuckling, as she grabbed an empty inkwell on her desk and drew her arm back. Why, he wondered idly, do they get so much prettier when they're mad?

He was so pleased with himself that he didn't try to shake Crocker's new shadow even once on his way back to the office.

THE TAG-END bitterness of a client's divorce case occupied his attention for most of the afternoon, and it wasn't until nearly six o'clock that he was able to get away.

The telephone book mentioned a Beverly Hills address for Todd Swann. At six-thirty Morgan stepped onto the porch and rang the doorbell.

The house was low and Spanish and comfortable, but its six months exile from a woman's care had begun to tell on it. Morgan had just bent down to retrieve the latest of the newspapers littering the

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shrubbery when the door before him swung open abruptly.

"Well?" Todd Swann said.

Slowly Morgan straightened. He unfolded the newspaper and held it out. Todd Swann was dressed in a smoking jacket and slippers. His breath smelled of excellent Scotch, but the vast amount he must have drunk had had no perceptible effect in calming his curiously raw and shattered nerves. His fingers shook uncontrollably when he grasped the newspaper. His face, Morgan thought, would have made Crocker's seem ruddy.

"Well?" Swann repeated. "What do you want? What are you doing here?"

"Prying," Morgan said easily.

"You're that detective," Swann said.

"Just a sideline," Morgan said. "I do all kinds of things. Detect. Deliver papers." He paused. "Collect guns . . ."

Swearing, Swann stepped back, started to slam the door shut. Morgan blocked it with his foot, half turned and caught the rest of its impact on his shoulder. Effortlessly he thrust it back, moved into the house. Swann stood in the center of the room, still holding the newspaper and gasping angrily.

"You're a hell of a host," Morgan said.

"You get out of here," Swann shrieked. "I'll—"

"You'll what?" Morgan snapped. "Slap my wrist?" He pushed the door shut behind him.

"Leave me alone!" Swann screamed.

"I know what you're thinking. I know what all of you are thinking!"

Warily, Morgan said, "Why do I always have to get the hysterical ones?" He nudged his hat back, watching the other, disgusted.

"She told you I had a gun," Swann continued in his high, drunken voice. "Didn't she? Didn't she?"

"Among other things, yes."

"Well, she lied! I've never owned a gun! I—"

"It can be traced," Morgan said.

The effect was as strange as it was expected. Astonished, Morgan watched Swann sink, collapsing as completely as a pricked balloon. The puffy eyes protruded. The slack mouth hung open. "Traced?" he whispered.

Morgan walked quickly to him, grabbed

him by the shoulder. "Traced," he repeated. "The .38. They'll match the barrel markings with the slugs in your wife's spine. They'll—"

Swann was crying, shaking his head from side to side. "No . . ."

"Why'd you kill her?" Morgan snapped.

"Why? Why?"

"I didn't!"

"It's all over, Swann! When they find the gun—"

"I didn't kill her!" Swann screamed.

"I shot her, but I didn't kill her. I was doing her a favor. You don't understand! Nobody understands!"

Morgan shook him like a child. "Snap out of it, Swann!"

But the empty eyes paid no attention, and the ragged, shrill voice only climbed higher. "Yes, I shot her! I shot her! You think I'm a monster. But I'm not. I did her a favor! I—"

Sighing, Morgan stepped back and brought a short, chopping right jab across the hollow chin. He held out his arms, caught the older man as he fell forward. Through a partially open door, he could see the end of a bed. Silently, he dragged Swann into the bedroom, stretched him over the silken coverlet and stared down at him as he would at some bothersome slug that might have crawled in from the garden.

CHAPTER THREE

Arsenic and Old Lettuce

HE HAD just turned to go through the nearby dresser drawers when a quiet sound from the living room brought his head up sharply. He pushed the drawer shut with his knee, glanced once at Swann and then moved soundlessly to the bedroom door.

Across the room, Crocker was leaning against the wall. He removed a badly gnawed toothpick from his mouth. "Hello, shamus," he murmured.

Morgan laughed softly, stepped into the living room and closed the door behind him. "Well, I'll be damned," he said. "I wondered why I couldn't spot a tail when I drove out here tonight. The old master himself was on me."

"You're a valuable property," Crocker

said. "I'd have hated to see you get lost."

"Still brooding about the report from Ballistics?"

"Still brooding, shamus."

Chuckling, Morgan made his way to a chair, sat down. "You know, Crocker," he said, "your face has been grey for so long I can't quite imagine how it's going to look when it turns red. Ought to be real pretty."

Crocker put the toothpick back in his mouth, gazed thoughtfully at the other. "You worry me, son," he said, "when you talk that cocky."

"You ought to worry. And don't think I'm going to be gracious when you offer your apology. I'm going to be nasty as hell."

Slowly Crocker glanced around the house. "Where's Todd Swann?"

"In the bedroom."

Crocker raised his eyebrows questioningly.

"He confessed," Morgan said. "He got a little shrill about it and I had to shut him up."

"Confessed?" Crocker said.

"The gun's around here somewhere. I was looking for it when you invited yourself in."

Grunting, Crocker shoved himself away from the wall, disappeared into the bedroom.

Morgan smiled after him. A writing desk beside the front door caught his eye. He got up and was going through it methodically when Crocker returned. "Well, Sherlock?" Morgan said, over his shoulder.

Crocker crossed to the phone. He began to dial slowly, deliberately. "You sure got your guts, Morgan," he said. His voice was dead, emotionless.

Puzzled, Morgan turned.

"Morrissey?" Crocker said into the phone. He stared at Morgan over the receiver and brought out his gun, leveling it on Morgan's stomach. "This is Crocker. Yeah. Tell the morgue to send out a wagon. 1320 Eden Lane. We got a customer." His grey face was two shades greyer than ever before. "A murder."

"Murder!" Morgan sat down slowly.

"Right," Crocker murmured into the phone. He hung up, transferring his gun to his other hand.

"I couldn't have hit him that hard," Morgan whispered.

"How much strength do you think it takes," Crocker said bluntly, "to stab a man in the throat?"

"Stab . . ." Morgan got to his feet.

"Hold it, son." Crocker's gun centered steadily on him.

Morgan glanced at him once and then crossed to the bedroom door, flinging it open. Nausea bit at his stomach when his eyes fell on the bed. No one in the world had ever looked quite as completely dead as Todd Swann. Blood from his severed jugular had dyed the silken coverlet beneath his shoulders a sodden crimson. The gleaming steel of a pair of scissors protruded like a hideous stickpin from his throat.

Rapidly he took in the rest of the room. The closet door was open now, and the bedroom window had been raised. There was no screen. Someone could easily have been standing in the closet. The murder could have been committed in a few seconds while he and Crocker were talking. Swann had been unconscious. He couldn't have cried out.

Out of the corner of his eye, Morgan saw Crocker approaching him. And there was no more time for theorizing. Crocker believed what he saw, and he had never been a man to hold still for an explanation.

"Well, shamus?" Crocker murmured.

Morgan drew a deep breath. "You missed the boat again, copper. Look there . . ."

He drew back to let Crocker peer through the doorway.

For a single second the barrel of the captain's gun dropped, and a single second was time enough. Morgan slapped Crocker's gun hand down viciously and brought a desperate left from the floor to Crocker's chin. Wheezing, Crocker fell back, trying to clear his head of the blackness, straining to get the gun up again. Morgan drove his fist into the older man's nose and followed through with a jarring uppercut that sent the captain sprawling into a baby-grand piano. There was a prim and dainty treble discord as Crocker spun against the keys. He caught himself for a moment, holding on instinctively, and then slumped slowly to the floor.

Breathing raggedly, Morgan turned him over with his foot. Never had Crocker seemed so peaceful. Morgan bent down, straightening one arm that had twisted beneath the captain's back.

"Sorry, Sherlock," he muttered.

He rose, ran his hands through his hair, picked up his hat and crossed to the front door.

• It was then he heard the siren.

He walked to the window, pushed the curtain aside. A black-and-white police car had just turned the corner.

Morgan stood still for a moment, his mind blank and bruised. The police car drew to a stop directly behind his own battered coupe. Wiping his suddenly moist hands on his trousers, Morgan turned, ran quietly through the living room to a short connecting hallway. The cheerful yellow walls of a kitchen beckoned to him. He crossed the squared lineoleum floor and pulled open the back door just as the front doorbell began to peal. Soundlessly he slipped out of the house. He sped across the unkempt lawn to a laurel hedge, forced his way through it and came out on a wide, two-car driveway. Without hesitating, he entered the adjoining yard and made his way to the next street.

A bus marked "Los Angeles—Fifth & Hill" was pulling away from the curb.

Morgan broke into a trot, swung aboard while the driver glared at him. After paying his fare he headed toward the wide rear seat. He did not attempt to think or to reason. He was content to lean his head against the back of the bus and to breathe evenly and slowly, grateful for every inch that widened between him and his immediate danger. For the time being, that was enough, Morgan decided, quite enough. . . .

IT WASN'T until the bus groaned to a stop at its downtown terminal point that the dullness began to leave his brain and to be replaced by clarity and coherence.

He got off and wandered aimlessly into Pershing Square, where he became part of a group listening to a soap-box orator discussing Russia, and where he was able to let his thoughts form whatever pattern they wished. Where, exactly, did he stand

now? What had he learned? That Todd Swann had shot his wife—but that he certainly hadn't been her sole murderer, since someone else had considered him sufficiently dangerous to be put out of the way. What had Swann said? "*I shot her . . . but I didn't kill her.*" Hysterical rationalization? Or drunken truth? How could you shoot a person, and yet consider yourself a benefactor rather than a murderer? How could you . . .

And then he saw it.

So suddenly and so sharply that it left him weak. He closed his eyes, checking the dozens of bits of information he had received that day without realizing that he was getting them, fitting them into his frightening new theory. A remark here. An attitude there. A lie told well. Another told badly.

Everything pointed so terribly clearly to the murderer—and yet there was no certain proof. There could probably never be proof. Only a confession forced from the murderer would do.

Above everything else, Morgan needed time to think, time to plan a fantastic trap. Where? Crocker would have his office covered, as well as his home. He patted his pockets restlessly, then stopped as his fingers brushed against a small notebook. He brought it out, opened it to a turned-down page and read: "Linda Lewis. 6200 De Longpre Ave., Hollywood." There was a drugstore on the corner with a public telephone booth. Quickly, he made his way to it, stepped inside and fumbled a nickel into the slot. He held the notebook open, dialing rapidly and awkwardly.

It was one of the hardest jobs he'd ever had to get the girl even to listen to him, to say nothing of taking him seriously. But the undertone of panic in his voice stood him in good stead. She gasped when he outlined the events in the Todd Swann murder.

"Of course you can come here," she said. "Of course."

"I want you to do something else for me," Morgan added. "Get Frederick Swann to call on you tonight. Give any reason you want, but get him over there."

"But—why?"

"I'm going to try something. I think I know who killed Holly."

"What!"

"Now don't go all to pieces. I'll be out there in half an hour. Okay?"

"Yes. Certainly."

"Thanks, kid."

He hung up, drew a deep breath and left the booth.

THE CAB from town deposited him at Linda's door just as the hands on his watch reached seven forty-five. He tossed a bill to the driver and crossed the walk as Linda appeared on the porch.

"I got hold of Mr. Swann," she said. "He promised to come as soon as he could."

"Fine."

The girl's face was pale and taut. "You won't . . . I mean, I'd hate to see anything happen . . . anyone get hurt."

"Nobody'll get hurt."

Morgan took the girl's arm, and together they went on into the house.

The neat, symmetrical rooms were as tidy and as feminine and as frilly as their owner. In the kitchen a few pots and pans bubbled on a clean white stove. The dining-room table had been set, and a small canary, happy as a ball of sunlight, cheeped and twittered in its cage by the window.

"I see that we're having our dinner date after all," Morgan said.

"Yes." Nervously the girl went into the kitchen, peered at the things on the stove. Morgan followed her, opened the refrigerator door and pulled out a crisp head of lettuce. "I wasn't kidding," he said, "when I told you I mix a mean salad. Got any French dressing?"

"How in the world can you be so

calm?" Linda said sharply. "You've just discovered another murder . . . and the murderer."

"Reminds me," Morgan interrupted. "When Swann gets here, have him sit in the dining room. That's important." Whistling tonelessly, Morgan took the lettuce to a sideboard, began peeling off leaves.

"I hope you know what you're doing," the girl said.

Morgan chuckled. "So do I," he murmured.

The buzzing of the doorbell startled them both. Linda glanced at Morgan and then walked slowly toward the front room. Morgan kicked the swinging door shut with his foot. He went into the bathroom, washed his hands, giving himself time for his grand entrance.

When he returned, he could hear them talking, Linda's high, nervous tones contrasting with Frederick Swann's clipped, almost British accent.

He waited, irritated by the grotesque beating of his heart, until they had reached the dining room. Then, picking up the two salads he'd concocted, he thrust the swinging door open.

Swann was standing by the table, his hat in his hands. He jerked his head around when Morgan entered. His mouth fell open stupidly. "Morgan!" he said. "What on earth—"

"Hello, Mr. Swann."

Astonished, Swann stared at Linda. "But I understood . . ."

Linda tried to look mysterious.

Easily Morgan put the salads down. "You're just in time for dinner. Join us?"

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"Why, I've—I've already eaten. I—"

"Join us anyway," Morgan said softly.

Again Swann glanced at Linda. Then, slowly, he chose a chair, still holding his hat. Linda was watching Morgan, waiting for a clue as to her next actions. Morgan nodded toward the salad, and she sat down, began to eat silently.

Clearing his throat, Morgan took a bit of lettuce from Linda's plate and stood beside the bird cage, offering it to the canary. "Have you seen your brother lately, Mr. Swann?" he asked.

"Todd?" Swann said. "I saw him this afternoon, yes. He came to the office. You were there." Angrily, the banker started to rise. "Morgan, I demand to know the meaning of this. It seems to me—"

"Your brother," Morgan broke in, "was murdered an hour and a half ago."

It was almost as though Swann were aging before their eyes. The straight shoulders fell. The lines in the stern face deepened. "What?" he whispered. He shook his head uncomprehendingly.

Morgan shoved the last of the lettuce into the bird cage. His voice was cold. "He'd been about to tell me the name of the person who'd killed his wife. He knew the name; he'd helped murder her himself."

"Morgan, I—"

"It's been a long road, Mr. Swann, and a dirty one. But this is the end of it. This is where we all get off." He turned slowly. "Because, you see—I know who killed both of them."

Swann stared at him mutely, his face twitching.

"In every murder case," Morgan continued quietly, "there's a good deal of lying involved. A lot of misunderstanding. Sometimes a basic error can throw the police off for months. That's what happened this time." He paused. "Everything was muddled because we all thought Holly Swann had been killed by the bullets that were found in her back. She wasn't. Nor had she run off with another man, as you suggested. Your brother had shot her because, oddly enough, he was too soft-hearted. He couldn't stand to see her suffer any more. You'd be surprised how clear things become when you accept that fact."

"But there was nothing wrong with Holly," Swann mumbled, "no reason for her to suffer."

"She was suffering," Morgan said, "because she'd been poisoned. Todd had agreed to the murder method, but he couldn't go through with it. He hadn't known how hideously painful a death it can be. Few people have any conception of the suffering—until they see it with their own eyes. It's not quick. And it's not easy."

SWANN put both hands on the table. "You said," he whispered, "that you know who did these things. Are you daring to accuse me? Do you actually think I'd murder my own brother?"

Morgan turned slowly, staring into the bird cage. "I know," he said, "that you wouldn't kill your brother. And I'm not accusing you of anything, Mr. Swann. I'm sorry about all this mumbo-jumbo. But I had to have someone here as a witness."

In the dead quiet, all of them followed his eyes to the bird cage. The canary had fallen off its perch, and was lying on its side, chirping feebly.

Linda stood up, her face white.

"That's right, Linda," Morgan murmured without turning. "I found the last link I needed when you left the room. The arsenic you and Todd used on Holly Swann."

Frederick Swann was staring at the girl. "I should have known," he whispered. "Why didn't I know? They were always together. . . ."

The girl was kneading her stomach. Her forehead was beaded with perspiration. "You devil . . . you fed the bird from my plate. You put—"

"There could never have been any proof," Morgan murmured. "Holly had been dead for too long. Only a confession from you would do. There are antidotes, Linda. You won't die—if you tell us why you committed the murders. I wouldn't wait too long if I were you."

"Get me to a doctor! Get me—"

"Remember how you described Holly's death to me, Linda? Writhing. Screaming. Fighting. I should have known then. You don't write, or scream, or fight when you're torn apart by a belly gun. You die

quick. Or when you mentioned that you'd had malaria. They use arsenic in treating malaria, don't they? You could alway get it easily, without arousing suspicion. Or even when you imitated Holly's voice for me. The truck driver and the erl wells. Remember? You were the one who telephoned Frederick Swann and spun the yarn about Holly running away from Todd. She was dead then. Wasn't she?"

"Hurry!" Linda screamed. "You said there was an antidote!"

"Why, Linda? Why did you kill Holly?"

"We did it together! It was as much Todd's idea as mine! He said he loved me. He'd loved me for years! But Holly wouldn't give him a divorce. I could have had everything she had . . ."

"And you ran to Todd after you'd let fall the fact that he had a gun. You were there when I rang, and you ran into the bedroom. You knew he had gone to pieces. You stabbed him to keep him quiet about—"

"Yes!" the girl screamed. "Yes! Yes! Everything was ruined. Everything . . ."

There was a rattle at the front door as a passkey clicked against the lock. Morgan spun around. Crocker, his face bandaged, walked in slowly.

"Well, Sherlock," Morgan said.

"Hello, shamus."

"You're just in time."

"I heard it. I been outside for quite a while. You ought to know better than to use a cab. They're awful easy to trace."

Linda was bending against the table. "Please," she shrieked. Please . . ."

"What about that?" Crocker snapped.

THE END

Morgan chuckled. Reaching over, he took a forkful of the lettuce from Linda's plate, ate it. "Care to have some, Sherlock?"

Linda looked up at him, her breath caught in her throat. "But—"

"Funny thing, the conscience," Morgan said. "I'll bet your stomach's killing you. Relax. There's nothing on the lettuce. I didn't find any arsenic. But I had to take a chance on you still having some around. I had to take a lot of chances. I thought I had it all figured out—but I couldn't have proved it in a thousand years. It was the perfect crime. Nobody could have convicted you, Linda, but yourself. Nobody."

Crocker and Linda both looked at the bird.

Again Morgan chuckled. "He'll be all right. A little sick, but nothing permanent. Don't you know you're never supposed to give a canary lettuce? It's the spray they use. Not enough to hurt a human being, but tough on the bird."

Crocker's eyes were twinkling. He took hold of Linda's arm, started her toward the door. "Come on, girlie."

"By the way, Crocker," Morgan said, "I'm sorry about that business in Swann's house . . ."

"Forget it," Crocker said. He hesitated at the door. "You know, Morgan, I still think we could use you in the department."

"You know, Crocker, I think I might take you up on that."

Crocker nodded, grinning. "So long, shamus," he murmured.

Morgan grinned back. "So long, Sherlock," he said.

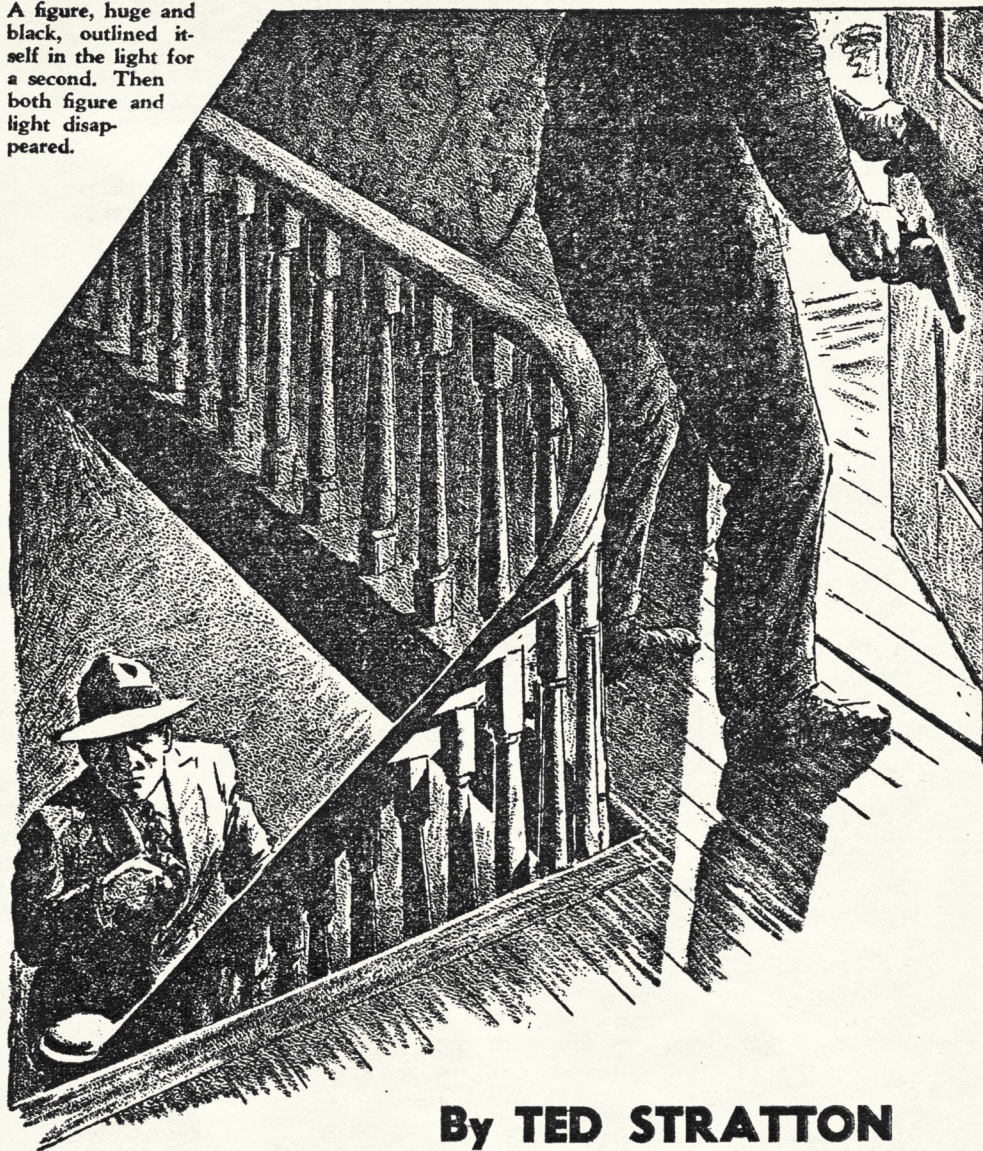
LIKE MONEY IN THE BANK!

For
Your
COUNTRY'S
Security . . .



For
Your
PERSONAL
Security . . .

A figure, huge and black, outlined itself in the light for a second. Then both figure and light disappeared.



By **TED STRATTON**

STAIRWAY to MURDER

The secret of the dark girl's death lay under her fingernails. But in an accident case, who can bother with such unimportant details?

INSIDE the lonely call room at headquarters, he tilted back on the hard chair and ran long fingers through his red hair. He stared dreamily at the blackness outside the window pane where the rain finger-tapped, like a bored man.

For the third time within the idle half-hour, he totaled them up. His prospects.

His next upward step would be detective second grade. Then, Detective Pete Graeme, first grade. Appropriate time intervals would produce a lieutenant, then Captain Peter Graeme, with a private office and stenographer. He mounted the gilded staircase to assistant commissioner, rested in a swivel chair for a few years, then reached the top. Commissioner Peter J. Graeme, with a sedan and chauffeur, and a hundred-dollar, blue pin-striped suit to set off the width of his shoulders.

Up there, he promised himself, he'd advance the men on merit. He'd junk most of the spit-and-polish orders. He'd . . .

At his elbow, the phone jangled. Coming down from the stars, he bounced off every third step. Picking up the dingus, he said, "Graeme," and waited.

"Yank the feet off the desk," somebody said in his ear. "You were on the bathtub case and a blonde's practically in your office."

He cradled the phone.

Someone opened the door cautiously, like an old maid arriving at the Elks Club on Saturday night. He stood up, dusted cigarette ash off his thirty-buck suit. "Come in," he said.

She shut the door carefully. He pointed to a chair. "Won't you sit down?"

She crossed the room, almost on tip-toe. "I've never been in a—a police station," she said, and seated herself, straight-backed, on the edge of the chair. She glanced curiously around the square, dimly lighted, ugly room.

It gave him a chance to inventory her.

Hands clasping a black leather pocket-book. A soft green hat, worn off her face. The front curls blonde and damp. A young face, too white and strained, with the mouth thin and anxious. A green dress, long, under a transparent raincoat. Metal-grey stockings and high-heeled shoes soaking wet.

WHEN she looked at him again, he noticed that her eyes were green. Dark green, like the sea off Bayhead. Her tongue moistened her lips and she said, all in one breath, "You're Pete Graeme the man at the desk told me and you were at 338 East Street."

"Not like in graham crackers," he said

quietly, to loosen her up. "Graeme, one syllable, to rhyme with came. Yes?"

"She—she—"

Her eyelids masked the green eyes. The toes of her shoes tried to bore into the rough flooring. He let the nervous rain work at the pane a moment, then prodded gently: "Yes?"

Fear ran around her face and holed up in her eyes and she said in one breath, "She didn't drown in the tub accidentally because she was murdered and I came to you Mr. Graeme!"

If her words had been meant for a bomb, it didn't go off under his chair. He asked casually, "Your name is—"

"Joyce Lord. I—I room across the corridor from her." Her white teeth nibbled at her underlip.

"I'll give you what we have on it," he said. "Michele Strang, so Bill Runk, the janitor, said, came home a few minutes before six P.M. He couldn't be surer than that, not with sixteen roomers, eleven females and five males, coming and going. At six-ten, Runk noticed water seeping through the ceiling of his first-floor apartment directly beneath Miss Strang's room and bath. Runk hurried upstairs. Her door was locked, a plain lock that can be locked or unlocked either from inside or the corridor. Runk heard water running inside her room and called out. She didn't answer. A Mr. Holcomb, another roomer, popped out of his room when he heard Runk's calls."

He paused. The girl did not stir.

"Runk," he continued, "opened the door with a master key. Runk and Holcomb went inside. She lay, nude, in a tub overflowing with water. Holcomb shut off the faucet. Runk called us. Dr. Lethridge, the M.E.'s assistant, found a contusion on the back of her neck, but no other signs of violence, Miss Lord."

He shrugged his wide shoulders. "It happens often, despite the Red Cross' warning that a bathroom is the most dangerous place in a home. In a hurry to take a bath after a day's work . . ." He paused. "Miss Strang *did* work, didn't she?"

"She—she was unemployed," the girl said.

"A foot slips on the slick tiling. One falls backward and . . ." He waved his

hands in finality. "Her home town?"

"I—I don't know," she admitted. "She was only in the house six weeks. All she talked about was the stage and a career."

"Six weeks with no job. In the background, any rich parents, a wealthy maiden aunt backing her stage career, or a man with money?"

Spots glowed on her cheeks. "Michele went out a lot with Mr. Holcomb, but she always had her own money."

"Of course. Is that all?"

"I told you she was murdered."

He said casually, "Dr. Lethridge tabbed it an accident."

She leaned forward. "Everybody, you and I, form habits, unbreakable, absolute habits. Michele always, *always* took a bath when she came home each day. A hot bath, the water so hot that her whole body would be red. I know she did that! I've seen her like that, lots of times. But Mr. Holcomb said the water ran into the tub from the cold water faucet. The *cold* faucet, Mr. Graeme."

"A little thing, Miss Lord. Cold water, instead of hot. Just this once, because it's warm out despite the rain, she took a cold—"

She stood up, interrupting his thought. "I knew it, I knew it. I came here and warned you that Michele had been murdered! And you sit there so casual, so calm, so sure of your—your superiority!" She stepped closer to him, her green eyes glowing. "Can't you see what the cold water means? The killer didn't know her habits. Can't you see that somebody killed her, placed her in the tub and turned the cold water on to make it look like an accident?"

He stood up. Negligently he brushed lint off the thirty-buck suit. "Who would kill her?" he asked.

"I—I don't know."

"There's a reason for murder—strong emotion, sex mania, money, and so on, Miss Lord. Why kill her?"

"I don't know."

"That's all you have, just the cold water?"

"Isn't that enough?" she countered.

"I'm sorry."

Her chin jerked up. "You'll reopen the case, of course?"

"Be reasonable, Miss Lord. I've lis-

tened to your story." He stared at her.

Scorn jumped from her eyes and clawed his face. "*You're* sorry! You conceited, stupid excuse for a detective, Mr. Graeme!"

"To rhyme with came, please."

She strode across the room, jerked the door open and turned. "I'm sorry, too. Sorry I disturbed your sleep, Mr. Graeme," and she went out, slamming the door.

He sat on the desk. "The quiet type," he muttered, and grinned.

A muscle pulsed on the side of his lean jaw. Cold water in the tub, he thought. He had checked the Strang room. The door being locked had puzzled him. There had been no letters from home. No letters from anybody. Just a girl in the big city with no home town: No back track. Funny . . .

He took a snap-brim hat from the clothes tree, slipped long arms into the soaked raincoat. When he passed the desk on the way out, the sergeant said, "Cute, that blonde. Where you going, Pete?"

"To climb a stairway," he said.

"Not to that girl's place, I hope. Cripes, she went out like you fed her garlic in candy!"

He went outside, turned up his collar against the slanting rain.

WHEN he had been on East Street earlier, there had been red, winking lights at the curb, curious crowds in the rain, and a beat cop at the door who had said, "Dead dame in a tub, is all, Pete."

Inside, he walked to the first door on the right, drummed his knuckles on a closed door. The door opened. A solid man with a beard, blue shirt and dungarees, a peaked cap on his head, stood there. "What's up?" the man asked.

"I want to borrow the master key, Runk."

"Hey, something new in the case, mac?"

"I have to take her valuables to the station house, is all."

Runk handed over a key.

Graeme went up the steps, paused at the door marked with a faded, white 1. He worked the key in the lock. Something creaked at his back. He turned

slowly. The door opposite had opened a crack. The crack widened and he glimpsed the face of the blonde, Joyce Lord.

"Oh," she said. "You came back! You believed what I told you!"

"Look," he said, "she's got junk in there that I have to take over to the station. If you've anything else on the case, some lead . . ." He paused. He could see Runk's upstaring, interested face at the base of the stairway. "That's all, Miss Lord. Just picking up some of her junk."

Her door slammed. He grinned and unlocked the door of Michele Strang's deserted room.

It was just as he had left the room. Shades drawn, lights on, and the single bed, cheap bureau, single chair, lamp and light table still there. When they had taken her from the tub, they had laid her out on the bed. He could see the indentation her head had made on the pillow, the impression her slim body had made on the bed and the still-wet counterpane.

He had laid a few of her valuables on the bed. Platinum wristwatch, new. Hammered silver bracelets. A handful of change. Two pocketbooks, one with eleven dollars in it. A passbook on a local bank, balance \$26.88, against a hundred-dollar deposit five weeks previously. Costume jewelry and a ring with a jade stone.

There had been stacks of nice things, like blouses and silk and nylons in the bureau drawers. And plenty of shoes, dresses, two suits, and a mink jacket with a Fifth Avenue, New York, label that suggested plenty of money, hanging in the closet.

But no letters from home. No home address. Not a scrap of information in the room to trail Michele Strang back to her home town. And her door had been locked.

He had gone over the room carefully, earlier. Now he got down on his knees, searched carefully. He lifted the rug. Nothing but dust. He stood up, scratched the side of his head.

She came home, took out her room key, he thought, inserted it in the lock from the corridor side. Unlocked the door, opened it, took out the key again and—where was the key?

He shrugged his shoulders, walked to the bed. A muscle on his lean jaw began

to jump excitedly. His lips thinned out.

He lifted the mattress at the foot of the bed, peered in at the flat, dusty spring. Nothing there. He replaced the mattress, stepped to the head of the bed and lifted the other end of the mattress.

"Check," he announced softly, triumphantly.

On the spring, lay a flat, square, black, metal box. Using a handkerchief, he picked up the box, lowered the mattress carefully in place. The box was unlocked. He lifted the cover. It contained three items. A silver dollar dated 1926. A photo of Michele Strang leaning over a balcony. The background, the hairdo, the dress she wore, all suggested Juliet, but no Romeo stood beneath the balcony making love to the smiling girl.

The third item was a life insurance policy. Dated one month previously. Michele Strang, 338 East Street, City. Beneficiary, an N. A. Cross, Oswego, Michigan. And the details on Michele Strang's background . . .

"Phony," he decided, and replacing the things in the box, put the box on the spring and the mattress and bedclothes neatly back in place.

When he went out he locked the door, trotted downstairs. Runk came out of his room, and he handed the janitor the key. "That damned water," Runk grouched, "ruined the ceiling in my room. Now I gotta paint it again."

"Tough," Graeme said. "Uh—Runk, we're having trouble on her background, who her relatives are so we can notify them. Any ideas?"

"She never said."

"Her home town?"

"You got me, mac."

"Letters?"

"Now look, mac, I didn't check her mail! I don't snoop! The roomers come and go and get their mail as they like."

"Her room rent paid in advance, eh?"

"Sure, every week on the dot she pays me up there in her room. She's not like that Holcomb guy on the same floor what I gotta dun and dun and threaten to throw him out if he don't—"

"Fire escape?"

Runk stared. "Sure, at the back. Look, it was an accident, wasn't it?"

"Yeah. She have any friends or visitors

from the outside?" Graeme's eyes were hard.

"Uh . . ." Runk's eyes sharpened. He scratched the side of his head at the hair-line under the peaked cap he wore. "You mean men, mac?"

"Men."

"Yeah, I come up to change a burnt bulb coupla nights back in the corridor. Dark there, and this big guy—big and tough looking—he come up the stairs sudden and I—well, I seen her with him and knew he was all right. He went into the room with her. I'd remember that big tough guy if I seen him again."

"That's all?"

"A big tough guy," Runk repeated.

Pete Graeme went outside into the driving rain. Once around the corner, he lengthened his stride until he was almost running.

HE SAT at the hard chair in the call room at headquarters and said smoothly into the phone, "You're right, Leth, it's unreasonable. But can't you drop out of the pinochle game and do an autopsy right away on the Strang girl? . . . Sure, you're busy. Look, can you use two tickets to the Sunday Double-header at the stadium? . . . Thanks, Leth. For two tickets, I'll be over later."

He cradled the phone. He tilted far back on the hard chair. He lit a cigarette, inhaled deeply. The rain pelted against the window pane.

He began to climb the stairway to the stars. Detective second grade, first grade, and so on. He had finished the third cigarette, had decided that when he became commissioner every man should have three weeks vacation with pay every year, and the phone jangled.

He lifted the phone. "Graeme."

"On an accident case you sure run up the phone bills," somebody said in his ear. "Michigan on the wire, dope."

Across hundreds of miles of wire, a strange voice monotoned, "Graeme? Knover, Oswego police. We checked like you said. No N. A. Cross in the city directory, but we make an N. A. Cross in Pomona Heights, a suburb. That help?"

"Does Cross have a daughter or young wife?"

"He could be a Mormon with six wives,

for all I know. You want us to check it?"

"Try this angle," Graeme said. "We're trying to make a young girl, possibly from Oswego or nearby. About twenty-two or three. Pretty. Black hair with overtones of blue. Medium tall, say five-five. Good build, weight a hundred-fifteen. Interested in the stage. Seems to have money, or money behind her. Mole on the back of her right hand, base of the forefinger. We got an Oswego address for an N. A. Cross and she ties in to him and—"

"Hold it," Knover ordered, and interest had replaced the drawl.

Graeme drummed on the desk, waited a hundred years. Finally Knover said, "We make her. You got her?"

"Yeah."

"Listen . . ."

Knover repeated information at length, added, "I'll be there by plane in the A.M., pal. Hang onto her, right?"

"Sure," he said tiredly. "She's in the morgue, Knover."

He cradled the phone, grabbed up hat and raincoat and went out into the rain.

* * *

Under the harsh glare of the bunched, overhead lights, Graeme leaned against the white-tiled sidewall and waited for Dr. Lethridge to finish the autopsy.

Tall, dark-haired Lethridge, the assistant M. E., left the operating table and came over to where Pete Graeme stood. "The brain is okay," he said. "Why the big rush, Sherlock?"

"So you can see that double-header for free."

"I'll bet. No water in the lungs. That meant the smack on her head killed her before she hit the water in the tub. Box seats, Sherlock?"

"Boxes."

"Blood in the spinal canal from an intracranial hemorrhage. Satisfied it was an accident, Sherlock?"

Graeme didn't answer. Lethridge lit a cigarette and puffed out a gust of smoke. "Good-looking girl. Plenty of muscle in the arms and legs."

Graeme stirred. "Anything under her fingernails?"

Lethridge swore. "In an accident case?" he asked. "You want a lot of work

for your two lousy tickets, Sherlock."

"Give me two more minutes, please."

Lethridge shrugged. He rummaged in a cardboard box, located a clean toothpick, and pulled the sheet off the corpse. Whatever was under the fingernails came off on the toothpick and was transferred in a smear to a glass slide.

"The games had better be good on Sunday, Sherlock," Lethridge warned. Slipping the slide under a microscope, he screwed one eye close down to the lens.

A half-minute passed. Slowly, Lethridge straightened. His face had tensed. He said softly, "Flesh and bits of hair under her nails, Pete."

"She was a strong girl," Graeme said, and started to button his coat.

"I'll be damned," Lethridge said. "She looked like an accident case, stuff like we get every week."

"Forget it," Graeme said. "I picked up stuff that you wouldn't know about, Leth. Expensive clothes, but no job. Good jewelry. So she had money behind her, always a cause for murder. No letters from home, no background dope in the room. Left a closed trail behind her, see? I didn't like the case from the first, but we don't like to start prying under rocks too soon."

He rubbed the side of his face, flexed his fingers and made hard fists of his hands. "In her room," he said softly, "she fought that killer like hell."

"Who?"

"It had to be a man, because she was strong, Leth. Five roomers, males, in the house, including Holcomb, a man she ran around with a bit. Two nights back she came in with a big tough guy who went into her room. Runk, the janitor, can identify him if we pick him up. And, of course, somebody we don't know about who could have sneaked up the fire escape at the back."

"But why kill her, pal?"

"Because her real name was Anna Cusick," he explained. "She lived in Oswego, Michigan, cashied in the Farmer's Bank. Six weeks back, she drew out eight hundred of her own money, plus five grand of their money, and took a powder. Dreams in her head, Leth. Crazy about a stage career. Wanted to be a second Cornell and needed plenty of money. Just in

case, she took out an insurance policy in the name of N. A. Cross, a Farmer's Bank official, to cover the five grand. Somebody got wise to her bankroll, which wasn't in a bank, Leth."

THE RAIN had slackened. Here and there in the dark sky, a star or two twinkled. A sedan sped along East Street. Its tires whined on the slick, wet asphalt.

Graeme went up the front steps quietly, tested the doorknob at 338. The door was unlocked. Gently he pushed it open. The hinges made no sound. He slid inside, closed the door carefully.

A single twenty-watt bulb struggled to illuminate the downstairs lobby. Up the stairwell, back along the corridor, a tiny light glowed. It was hushed and still up there.

He listened. He heard nothing. He slipped out of the raincoat, laid it across the arms of a chair. He lifted his right hand, slowly closed the fingers into a fist. He smiled grimly.

His feet made no sound on the throw rug as he moved. Then, suddenly, something clicked in the stillness.

He poised, jerked his head up, stared up the staircase. A block of light flashed across space. A figure, huge and black, outlined itself in the light for a breathless second. Then the figure and the block of light disappeared.

The sound he heard, an instant before the figure disappeared behind a closed door, sent him up the stairway two steps at a time. Not a door stood open along the dim corridor, but that didn't matter. He crouched at the door of the dead girl's room, listened. A deep voice. And a feminine voice.

Fingering the knob with his left hand, he reached his right hand inside his coat and grasped the butt of the gun in his shoulder rig. Swiftly, silently, he twisted the knob, pushed the door open a crack, and peered inside.

Two people stood in the bright light from the ceiling bulbs. Runk, the janitor, by the side of the bed. Wearing the familiar peaked cap, the blue shirt, the dungarees. His thick hands gripped Joyce Lord's shoulders.

The girl was whimpering, "Take your hands off me, please!"

"That's enough, both of you," Graeme ordered, stepping inside.

Runk whirled around. The girl gasped, pulled her loosened robe tightly over a green nightgown. She crouched against the wall.

"Tell it," he ordered.

"I heard somebody walking around up here, mac," Runk explained. "My room's right below, see? I come up and she was going through the girl's stuff. She don't have a right to do that—right, mac?"

"Right," Graeme agreed. He stared at the girl. "Well, Miss Lord?"

She straightened against the wall. "I came in," she said, "because you wouldn't reopen the murder case. Michele was killed, remember, Mr. Graeme? When the house quieted, I—I decided to see if I could find something the stupid police had overlooked."

"Strang murdered, huh?" Runk growled. "Hey, nobody told me that."

"Did you find anything, Miss Lord?" Graeme asked.

"No," she said slowly.

"I locked the room when I left," Graeme said. "How did you get into this room, Miss Lord?"

"With my key. The locks on this floor are all alike. My key could open her door. Everybody's key could open everybody's door. Didn't you know that?"

He hadn't known it. He'd spent a lot of time trying to find the missing door key that belonged to Michele Strang, but it didn't matter any longer.

"Are you going to arrest me for her murder?" the girl asked, and her eyes dared him.

"Relax, both of you," he said, and grinned. "Help me get her things together. Runk, strip a pillow off the bed to hold her valuables; she didn't have more than one valise."

Runk pulled a pillow from under the counterpane, stripped off the case. "You can help, Miss Lord," Pete Graeme ordered. "The things on the bed, first."

RUNK held the case open. They scooped pocketbooks, the bank book, rings, and so on, off the bed and dropped them into the case. "You take the bureau," Graeme ordered, and going into the closet, picked up an armful of shoes

and returned to the staring Runk.

"Hold the case up," he said, and dropped in the shoes. He glanced at the girl. She had one of the bureau drawers open.

He set himself in front of Runk, said, "What about the cap?"

"Cap?" Runk asked, surprised.

"You and the scare stuff about a big, tough stronger!" Graeme snapped, and whipped the peaked cap off Runk's round head.

"Hey," Runk yelled, too surprised to drop the case.

Under the lights, Graeme could see the hairline end high on Runk's head. There were scratches on Runk's scalp—angry, red scratches. "She fought you like hell, didn't she, Runk?" Graeme said.

Runk stood nailed to the floor. "I—I—"

"You dirty snake," Graeme said softly.

He slammed his left fist into Runk's stomach. He brought up the right fist. His knuckles slammed against Runk's chin. Runk sagged. He hit him twice more before Runk dropped to the floor. The pillow case slipped from Runk's nerveless hands.

Pete Graeme stood spread-legged over Runk. "Get up," he ordered.

Runk moaned.

"Killer," Graeme snarled. "You knew about all her money in the black metal box under the mattress. Did you catch her with the box out when you came in to collect the room rent, Runk?"

No answer from Runk.

"Did you figure from her clothes and jewelry that she had money behind her, Runk, and nosed around, eh?"

No answer.

"When she reached home, you followed her up here, Runk. You had it all figured out. She wouldn't be afraid of you. You knew you had to kill her to get your filthy fingers on her money. She let you in. You knew she always took a bath when she came in because your room is under hers and you could hear her run a bath each night. But she fought you, scratched you, because she was strong and you were busy keeping her mouth shut."

His anger mounted. "You banged her head on the tub, Runk. You stripped off

(Continued on page 126)

COLLECTION NIGHT



"When I met Gus, he was robbing father's safe in the library," Carol said. "I helped him get away with the money."

By
DOROTHY DUNN

You'd have to look far to find a more loyal guy than Dominic. Squeal on his boss, Gus Dooley? Never! But where Gus' wife, slim, soft-lipped Carol, was concerned, it was every man for himself—and the D.A. take the hindmost!

I NEVER sang on anybody in my life. And even now I hate the idea of squealing on Big Gus Dooley. I just don't like squealers.

I kept my mouth shut three times for Big Gus. I took the rap for him three times, too, although what they've got me in for now is nothing like what they'd have slapped on my boss if I'd rattled on him.

Was I scared to sing? Scared I'd end up with my head bashed in by the boys? The cops tried to needle me on that. But I never been scared in my life, except maybe scared of being hungry when I was a kid, too dumb to think about taking what I wanted. After I learned what you could do with a gun I never was scared again.

I hurt a few times, sure. Mostly when

the old lady would brag about what a good boy her Dominic was. But when I was fifteen I stopped going home. The old lady had found out what kind of a boy she had and her eyes got sad and she cried a lot. Then I had to do time in Booneville because I wouldn't sing on Big Gus. That was ten years ago, and I haven't been home since.

I tried to like spaghetti the way they fix it at the Beverly Brown Derby, fifteen hundred miles away from the old shack on Cherry Street in St. Louis. But most of the time I eat veal mornay. Somehow spaghetti doesn't taste, any more, the way it did when I was a kid.

No, I wasn't scared to sing on Big Gus. I believed in him, knew that his little gang would stick together, move up together. And we did. We came a long way. From Cherry Street to a ranch house in the Valley, with a swimming pool and interior decoration by the best firm in Los Angeles, was moving up plenty for Big Gus Dooley. He used to be a bartender. Now you can't tag him at all. You just look around and know he's rolling in green stuff.

There's this swell house, two cars and a station wagon, servants to turn his bed down and empty his ashtrays, a bunch of society people coming for parties and falling into his pool after too many sidecars. And best of all, there's his wife, Carol.

She's twenty-five, just my age, and only half as old as Gus. There's this long blonde hair that shines in the sun and comes alive when she sits at the head of their dinner table in the candlelight. Her skin is golden tan, and the first time I saw her I got excited and kept saying to myself, "Dominic, there's your dame!" I must have said it fifty times in the first hour. But I scarcely spoke to her.

I had just got out of prison, the second stretch I'd done for Gus. I was pale and too thin. The liquor was hard to take after a year away from it. The sea food salad was pretty rich after the tin-plate specials in the Big House.

Gus had invited me to stay at his home so I could lie in the sun and get back on my feet. He was being swell about it. He'd said, "Appreciate what you did, boy. What's mine is yours. Loll around as long as you like, and if you want anything, holler!"

THAT was the second time I'd done something for Big Gus. Now I was being rewarded for not singing. Fair-haired boy. I could write my own ticket with him.

Gus told Carol I'd been ill. There was a bunch of dolled-up people standing around and he introduced me as a member of his old fraternity at Yale. Carol just smiled her vague smile and said, "I hope you'll enjoy your visit." The other people smiled and nodded, too. Most of the women were loaded with real jewelry, and I wondered if the chicks were allowed to leave with their feathers still on. I guessed they were. The chit-chat was pretty friendly but way over my head.

How could Gus get away with that college business? Carol could talk to me for ten minutes and know I never went to school much. Gus was good at pretending and had picked up a lot of the jargon, maybe enough to get by at a party, but how long could he fool his own wife? She'd be bound to call the office of Allied Services, Inc. some day, and Torpedo Joe might pick up the phone. She'd know then he belonged to the wrong fraternity. The Torp sounds not only like the wrong side of the tracks—he sounds like something the train ran over.

The answer was simple. We were stretched out on lawn chairs one evening with mint juleps, and Gus wasn't around. I'd been trying to act like Yale for a week, and I was tired of it.

I said, "Look, Carol. I haven't been ill. I've been in prison."

She rolled her head lazily and I caught the full force of those clear blue eyes.

"I know, Dominic. I know all about you and Gus. He told me you took the sentence for him, so I guess I owe you something too. It's only my friends who must think you're something you're not. It's worth the trouble, having my friends come. Clouds things over and confuses the police."

"You mean they're really your friends? That society bunch?"

"I grew up with them," she said smiling.

"Did you know?" I asked her. "Did you know Gus was a crook before you married him?"

"Of course, Dominic. I knew."

"Then why?" I asked, knowing my voice had no business to sound so sore

about it. "Why would you let yourself in for a marriage like that? He's twice your age, too!"

She stuck her nose in the mint leaves.

"Gus is an exciting person," she told me. "And you'll have to admit that he's been very successful at his—uh—career."

"Very. So you were broke when you met him! Was that it? Society and a fancy family, with not enough dough to buy gas for the Cadillac?"

She laughed out loud at that one.

"On the contrary. When I met Gus he was robbing father's safe in the library. There was twenty thousand in cash there and several million in the bank."

I chilled at that and said to myself, "She's not your dame, after all. She's got a screwy streak. Forget it, Dominic. Forget it!"

But I was curious.

"Did Gus get away with the dough?"

"Certainly. I helped him. Next day he took me to lunch. Later, after I'd coached him, we took father and mother to *Ciro's*."

"Dandy! On father's twenty thousand?"

"Yes." She seemed to think it was a good joke.

"What's the pitch, Baby? You going to reform Big Gus? Is that where the kick is?"

"No. The kick is the same for me as it is for all of you boys. I enjoy stealing without getting caught. I help Gus plan."

I got out of my chair and put the julep on the grass.

"You must be nuts," I said, walking away before she could answer.

I went around to the cabaña and hopped into a pair of trunks. Then I went back and threshed about the pool, ignoring her lazy, amused gaze from the lawn chair. I sensed the approval in her eyes, but it made me all the more angry. "What if your black, wavy hair does appeal to her?" I asked myself. "She's nuts! She's a million-dollar babe who gets a kick out of stealing for fun. What fun is there in being a crook? She's off the beam, that's all!"

Long ago, I'd decided I'd quit the racket as soon as I made enough dough to be safe. I knew for sure now that she wasn't my kind of dame.

She was still in the chair when I came

back dressed. She waved to the fresh drink she had waiting for me.

I ignored her and crossed the terrace to the house, looking for Big Gus. I'd had enough of his sunshine and his gorgeous wife. I wanted some work, or I wanted to pull out. I also wanted a girl of my own. A nice girl.

BIG GUS has got something you can't name. Maybe it's the blue eyes in the round face that make people trust him. Anyway, when he looks at you squarely, he looks interested in what he sees. He flatters you with his interest. I can remember that as a kid I felt like his equal in ten minutes, like a big shot. He still makes me feel that way.

I found him in the den, watching the wrestling matches over television. He waved me in, laughing.

"Look at that step-over toe hold, Dominic. Damn if we couldn't use some of these tricks on tough customers! That truck driver, remember? I'd like to—Ooops!... the Norse Giant broke it. There goes that head lock again. I get a kick out of this, boy!"

He didn't need to tell me. He looked like a kid at the circus. He wouldn't take his eyes off the screen for the next hour.

"Quite a show they put on," I said.

"What a show!" exulted Big Gus. "The Giant has taken plenty of punishment, but he'll get the fall. You wait and see if he doesn't. Come on. Sit down."

"Not tonight, Gus. The screen makes my eyes tired. But I'd like to talk to you when it's over. Look me up on the terrace?"

"Sure, sure. But you ought to stay for the tag teams. That's when things really get rough."

I tapped his shoulder and said I'd see him later, and he said sure, without looking away from the ring. The Giant was bouncing off the ropes, getting ready for a face kick or a flying tackle. I'd like to have seen it, but I knew Gus wouldn't move for another hour. It was too good a break to pass up.

She wasn't my dame, but I had this hour, the first one I'd been sure of, and I was in the mood to polish off the ideas I'd had about her in the beginning. She'd worked me over so much with her eyes

that I knew I could find her lips. I wanted to give her a kiss that would show her what she missed by being a screwball. I could look for my nice girl later. Right now, there was some unfinished business.

She'd tossed off her robe and was swimming with long, lazy strokes around the floodlighted pool. I squatted at the edge and said, "Come on out, Baby."

She swam the other way. I raised my voice. "I'll come and get you if you don't."

She didn't like the holler. She's wise to the jealous streak in Gus. She flutter-kicked over, splashing me on purpose.

"Shut up!" she said. "Go away before Gus comes out here and gets rough with you."

"Gus wouldn't come out right now if I blasted the pool, Baby. Ever seen him watch a wrestling match?" I had her wet wrist in a firm grip. "Please come out, honey. We've got an hour to talk. That's all. I'm leaving here tonight. Leaving, because you're driving me nuts."

That pleased her. The eyes slanted up, full of mischief, and she looked triumphant. She hunched out of the pool and reached for the towel. I helped her, and hated the way my hands shook. Look out, Dominic, I thought. She's not your kind of dame. Don't let her get under your skin. Don't bite something that'll make you sick to swallow.

She led me to shadowy spot on the terrace, where a grove of eucalyptus trees and cedars shielded us from the house. She raised her lips with a long sigh and it was a long kiss. All my good advice to myself melted away. She helped me fall in love with her on the first kiss, just the way she'd helped Big Gus rob her father's safe. It was crazy. Holding her in my arms, listening to her whisper my name, it seemed that she was giving me a quivering echo of something she'd dreamed about all week. It wrecked me. I lost my head and let myself believe she meant it. I wanted to believe she meant it.

"Carol, come away with me tonight. Please! I'll get you to Las Vegas. We can be together like this always, you and me. That's what I want, Carol. That's what you want, too."

She broke my half-Nelson on that. She threw me into the ropes.

"Don't be silly, Dominic. You know

that Gus does too much business in Las Vegas. I'd never get away with it."

"Reno, then. Or Mexico. Anywhere. Just leave him, Baby! Don't you love me?"

She put her arms around me again.

"Yes, Dominic, but we'll have to take our time when we can find it. Big Gus would kill us both. I know he would. There's nothing we can do . . . unless..."

My arms tightened. "Unless what?"

"Unless something should happen to Gus."

I STEPPED back and lit a cigarette staring at her.

"Maybe you don't realize how much I like Gus," I told her. "Since I was fifteen, I've been his friend, and he's been mine. That makes ten years we've stuck together."

"You had a few rests in prison," she reminded me, holding out her hand for a drag of my cigarette. "And for what? Because Gus had to be spared. Fine friend he's been to you!"

I didn't like having her think I was a patsy.

"It was better that way. Gus is the boss man. He could always do more on the outside than I could. He always gave me my cut afterward, always pulled me out ahead of time. Business. You don't understand the business."

"You've been a blind fool, Dominic. I hate to tell you this, but Gus would cut your throat in a minute to save his own."

"Yeah? He never has."

"He's saving you for the big rap," she said. "As long as you're around, he's always got a chance to finesse for an extra trick."

"What the hell does that mean? Finesse?"

"Never mind. Just watch your step with Gus, or you may find yourself in a spot you can't squirm out of. Do you really like prison life?"

"It stinks. But I'll always take a rap before I'd sing on a pal. I'm just that way."

"Too bad, Dominic. You remind me of an inscription in an old Cremona violin of my father's. *'Alive in the woods, I was silent. Now dead, I sing.'* That could happen to you."

"Skip the classy talk. It's wasted. What's a violin got to do with me and Gus?"

"You missed the point. I might have known you would. But remember Dominic. The day may come when you wished you had sung on Gus, but you'll probably be dead by then."

"Crazy. You don't know what you're talking about, Carol. You got crazy ideas about Gus and me. I've known him since I was a punk kid."

"But it takes a wife to really know a man."

"That works both ways, Baby. Does Gus know all there is to know about you?"

"I'm afraid he does. I'm very much afraid he does," she said.

For a moment, her big, blue eyes looked haunted in the moonlight.

I couldn't trust her. Right then, I knew I couldn't. It's funny how you can still be nuts about a dame like that. You know she means trouble, but once you've tasted the full, quivering lips you know there's no turning back. You're in trouble up to your neck, and you can't do a thing about it.

I DIDN'T get around to telling Big Gus I'd had enough of his sunshine. I'd had just enough of his wife to know there had to be more, and the sunshine was my best excuse. Not only that. Carol had got me wondering about Gus.

Where did I really stand with him? Had I been a fool to be so loyal, or was I right in thinking he'd always back me up? I hated to think that my only friend might have changed. My family didn't exist for me any more. There wasn't anybody except Gus for me to feel at home with.

When he strolled out after the wrestling, I was by myself on the patio, drinking a Scotch.

"Beautiful night, eh, Dominic?" He raised his big barrel chest to gulp in the jasmine-scented air. You could see satisfaction in his eyes as he gazed across the expanse of lawn to the twinkling lights of the other Valley homes.

I told him it was a beautiful night. Sure. It was fancy as all hell, but I was getting restless to make some dough on my own. What was cooking? When was

I going to get back into practice? How was Torpedo Joe? I hadn't even seen him since I got out of stir.

Gus laughed at my string of questions.

"Take it easy, boy! Relax! You want a few thousand, just ask. What's mine is yours. I told you that."

Yeah, I thought. What's yours is mine. Even Carol. But I don't ask. I just take. I never asked for anything in my life.

"I'm talking about getting back to work, Gus. I don't want any dole. You're grifting this big dough from somewhere, and I want in. Strictly business."

He put his big hand on my shoulder and I was conscious of its weight.

"You're in, Dominic. But the business has changed since the old days. Things have to be slick here, boy. Polished up. There's lots of money in this town, but it's smart money."

"You been talking to too many bankers at your parties, Gus. I don't have to start at the bottom and work up. I'm as good a crook as ever, and I may have learned a few tricks in stir that you never heard of."

"Old tricks, boy. From has-beens. This is the atomic age, the jet-propelled century. Crime has to keep pace. The boys don't pull a job every week for rent and grub. It's big now. One job a year is enough if it's planned right. Then you live off the income. Time to play. People play a lot in California."

"So I notice. Am I going to be in on it when next year's income is grabbed?"

"Sure, Dominic. I've got you all lined up. I just didn't want to bother you with business until you were rested up."

"Fine, Gus. I'm rested. And I'm interested. What kind of crime pays off in such big amounts?"

"The well-planned snatch."

"Are you kidding? That's Federal! There's more headaches in a kidnap than in a bottle of Vodka. Name one snatch artist that ever got what he asked for and was able to spend it. Name one!"

He smiled like a father.

"I'm one, Dominic. But like I said, the business has changed. Things are different in California, and the way I plan a snatch is a brand-new racket. My cases never come to the attention of the law,

and I've eliminated all the crude touches. I never hit small people. A million bucks doesn't mean a thing to a man with ten million. Just figure it out."

Right then, I couldn't. The thing didn't sound good. Kidnaping is the lousiest racket there is, and most crooks steer clear. The rap is plenty stiff, ever since the Lindbergh case.

My face must have showed what I was thinking.

"You see, Dominic? I can tell you don't understand how the business is any good. You're remembering all sorts of dirty little cases, where kids got bumped and men got caught. I'm not talking about a snatch like that. I go at it differently. No rough stuff. Just a commodity for sale and then the collection."

"You have to hold a human being for sale. I can't see the difference."

"You don't know the people here," laughed Gus. "I never hold the victims. They stay at home all the time, but they know they've been snatched. They know they have to pay off to avoid the discomfort of being taken away from home. By choosing the right families, I've never had to go through with a thing. To them, the payment is just like paying for the thousand other comforts their money can buy. You know the odd thing, Dominic?"

"The whole pitch sounds odd to me!"

"You'll catch on. The odd thing is that my operations have become a sort of legend. You know how some wealthy people love to impress each other?"

"Sure. I know."

"Well, the first family I hit was one of the richest and most prominent. The letter was very dignified that explained the new system of the super-snatch for streamlined people. The old gent in the family is bored with life and got a kick out of the whole thing. He bragged about the letter. You see what happens after that?"

"You hit him again?"

"No, indeed! But the example has been set. The letters now put our clients in the social swim. Here's Mrs. La-de-da who can tell the gals at the Ocean House that she's also been kidnaped in comfort. That puts her on equal footing with our most prominent family. See?"

"Sounds nuts, people being that silly."

But maybe he had something. I was so confused by this time that I wasn't sure. Los Angeles is an idea town, I knew that. It's a town where competition necessitates the unusual approach to bring in business. The meat market, for instance, that displays their steaks on velvet jeweler's pads in spot-lighted windows; the gala openings for gas stations; the hairdresser that serves free Martinis to customers.

Maybe Gus had hit the pulse of the town with a novel and appealing crime. I wouldn't know. I guessed I'd been in prison too long.

"You said you had me lined up in the next one, Gus. What part do I play in your little comedy snatch?"

"I trust you more than anybody in the world, Dominic. I'm going to let you take over the collection. I wasn't too sure of the last boy, but I'd trust you with my last dime."

That sounded phony. "Isn't the collection the riskiest part?" I asked him.

"Not the way we handle these, Dominic. You'll see. But that's enough business tonight. We'll start going over the plans with you in the next few days. Drink?"

"No more, thanks."

My head was reeling with what Scotch I'd had. It was also reeling with my new dreams about Carol.

"Think I'll turn in," I told Gus.

"It's early," he protested. "Stick around. We've got a gang coming in after a while and there'll be a buffet supper about twelve. Swell bunch. I'd like you to meet them."

"Some other time, Gus. After the prison routine, I find it hard to break into this gay life too much at once."

He put a fatherly arm around my shoulders.

"It must have been tough for you, boy. Maybe tougher than I realize. You do whatever you feel like doing. My house is your castle, after what you did for me."

I told him thanks, that he was being swell. Then I wandered through the maze of loop-pile carpets to my room in the east wing of the sprawling ranch-type home. My bed was turned down, the satin spread draped over a chair.

I lay in bed, smoking, scattering the

ashes out of the little petal ashtray all over the top of the inlaid night stand. I thought about the bunk in prison, about the luxury of one fog there, about the way you nurse it and let your mind drift outside the bars with the smoke. Now that I was on the outside, where I'd dreamed of being. I wasn't happy.

Things had changed. I was missing the old days, when we'd get together in the back room and plan the next day's activities out of the sides of our mouths. Business before pleasure in those days. It made the difference between eating and not eating. We seemed more together then, more interested in each other.

It took me a long time to go to sleep that night.

A WEEK later, Gus had the thing all lined up. I'll have to give him credit. He had what Carol called a "dossier" on the client, and after reading that you knew everything about the old duck, even to what he always ate for breakfast.

Two days after I saw the plans, Gus had an answer to his demands. A hundred thousand dollars would be handed to the "agent" who would call. Cash. It sounded like something out of a fairy tale. I couldn't help questioning the chances of a thing like that working out.

I could see myself walking away from that house with a hundred grand that was

stolen, and I could see myself walking right into the arms of an FBI man. I could see a kidnap charge being made. I said as much to Gus.

"Don't be silly, Dominic! You'll be protected from all sides. Haven't lost your nerve, have you, boy?"

No, I hadn't lost my nerve. I was just a dope who didn't understand modern crime. I decided to do what I was told and keep my fears to myself.

The night of the collection, I was on the patio with Carol. I kissed her and she said, "Don't. Gus might come out."

The butler came out instead and said that Mr. Dooley was ready to leave and was waiting for me. I grinned. It used to be the gunning of the motor that rounded us up at the car. This was polite crime, though. I kept forgetting.

Gus drove the red convertible with the top down, and his other two boys looked like a couple of sportsmen, with their coppery skin and gabardine sport shirts. I wondered where they packed their rods. Or if they packed them.

We wound down the Valley roads and got onto Ventura Boulevard, which took us to Laurel Cañon where the angel was waiting in his hilltop mansion. The road up to the house was a winding, private drive and we began to talk business for the first time.

Gus said, "We'll park the car and wait

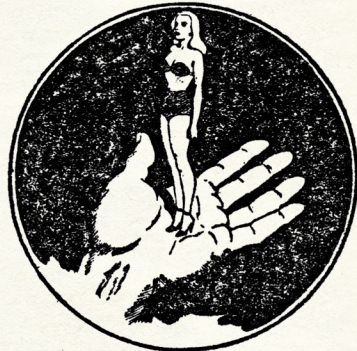
Heads he wins, tails she loses. . . .

Sinner Take All

Headliner Files Mystery Novel

by **FREDERICK C. DAVIS**

Thackeray Hackett's deadly cane started slashing . . .
when a minked beauty gave Preston a tumble—
into a homicidal harem.



DIME
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for you, Dominic. Nothing's going to happen, but here's a gun. That'll make you feel better, won't it, son?"

I took the rod, feeling a few quivers in spite of myself.

"Why the gun?" I asked. "I thought the new racket went like silk."

"It does," laughed Gus. "But the gun will give you the confidence you need. I've picked up a lot of this psychology stuff from Carol. You can't change all at once, Dominic. Next time you won't even think about it."

He made me feel better. I dropped the gun in my pocket, and he said he'd turn the car around while I made the collection. "Just say you're from Allied Services," he told me, "and you'll be shown right in."

It worked. I followed the butler through the house to the library. Just like that. Just that easy.

I walked right into it. There was the old goat lying on the floor dead, dried blood ringed around one eye. And there was the room full of cops, all looking at me over gun sights.

A man in plainclothes came over and took the rod out of my pocket. He tossed it to a harness bull and said, "Let's hope the slug matches. I think it will. The Dooleys have never given us a wrong tip yet."

My throat tied up in knots. The Dool-eys! Gus and Carol, working together on a frame. Gus with his friendship gag and Carol with her ripe lips. Carol warning me against Gus to find out how loyal I was. I felt sick. Just as sick as I'd felt years ago, when my mom found out I'd been buying her presents with stolen money.

I didn't say a word, but they let me have it. They showed me a note the old man had and told me the handwriting experts would check it. The note took me back to the past, too. I'd printed them like handbills and the Torp and I used to leave them at little stores during the lean days. They all said the same thing "Have the money ready, or else." There never was any "or else," but we picked up a few bucks from people who were afraid. I wondered who had saved one of these notes. Gus? Torpedo Joe?

I wanted it to be Joe, somehow. Not Gus. If I lost faith in Gus, I'd lost every-

thing. I couldn't bear thinking of it.

Maybe the cops were trying to get me to turn against the man they really wanted. It was an old trick. Pit one crook against the other. I clammed.

But the man in the grey suit kept talking. He kept throwing things at me—jobs I was supposed to have pulled, just like this one. They had a list of charges as long as Sunday in prison. At last he got disgusted and quit. "I'm wasting my breath," he said. "You know all this. The court will take care of it. The *Federal* court, pal!"

When he got outside, the red convertible was gone.

WELL, that's just about all. I was a three-time loser; the slug matched; the handwriting was mine; the old man was dead. I'd been framed, but good.

I saw a paper on the train, going from L. A. to San Francisco. The fellow who had his wrist cuffed to mine let me read the article that had caught my eye. Gustave Dooley, the husband of the beautiful and prominent Carol Delhaven Dooley, who was known in the best social circles, was going to run for mayor. Mr. Dooley had been active in politics for several years, was highly respected by the community and there were predictions that he would win the election hands down. The article talked about his magnetic personality, his talent for making and keeping friends, his gifts for organization, and his wonderful effect on the youth of the community. It seemed that he gave a few nights a week to teen-towns that he financed out of his own pocket. His wife was also active in charitable groups.

My hands were clenched and I was shaking with anger as I threw the paper aside.

"What's the matter?" the deputy asked. "You scared to hole up at Alcatraz?"

"Shut up!" I snapped.

"Okay, pal. Only the Rock isn't a bad spot. Far as climate goes, it can't be beat. You got a pretty view of Frisco and Oakland."

"I've got a pretty view of a lot of things," I told him.

I could see the whole setup now. Gus had made his personality pay off. Sure,

(Continued on page 127)

MERRY WIDOW

"I've a funny feeling, Rick," she said, "that I ought to tell you something, now, tonight. . . ."



By
**WINSTON
BOUVÉ**

How much should a man sacrifice for his wife, Rick Morley wondered. Already he'd given up months of his youth for his aging wife, and she—just—simply—refused—to die!

RICK MORLEY knew before he'd finished the song she'd requested that the still-passable blonde at the best table in the dive was his pigeon. To be plucked when, as and how he chose.

And not too bad to take, either, he decided, in that sleek black Hattie Carnegie number that set off her

spectacular pearls. It made him a little sick to watch her play with them as if they were an item from Woolworth's. Keep your eyes off those pearls, Rickie boy, he cautioned himself. Okay to join them for a drink, but don't crowd things. . . .

He gave her his number-one, little-boy

smile as her escort pulled out a chair for him.

"This is great, but you're sure I'm not busting in on you . . . ?"

The naive approach was the one that always got the old gals. Brought out the mother in them, along with other things.

"It's just sweet of you to join us," she told him in the voice of the Southern belle she'd been twenty years ago. "This is Mr. Trask, and I'm Mrs. Dawson—Mrs. Henry Dawson. I enjoy your singin' so much this is the third time I've come to hear you."

As if he didn't know. She was putting it on the line, all right. And yet, he realized, she wasn't being coy. The child-like pleasure in her big blue eyes was genuine. It gave him an up-surge of confidence in the charm he'd felt slipping, too often, lately.

But he mustn't be too confident. Play it cagey, he warned himself, especially with the unenthusiastic Trask watching him like an aging hawk.

Trask was, it appeared, not only the senior member of the law firm that handled Mrs. Dawson's affairs, but an old friend as well. Sufficiently privileged to say, "No more to drink for you, Lora Lee. You know liquor's poison to you. And it's after two. You're being a bad girl."

"And you're bein' an old fuss-budget," she said, not sweetly. "Run along, Edward. I hate bein' hovered over. Mr. Morley will see me home, I reckon."

It was a royal command, and it tempered Rick Morley's exultance with a faint queasiness. But what the hell—the widow of Henry Dawson, whose soft-drink concoctions had made him a million-dollar success story, could afford to be imperious.

"We seem to have lost our chaperon," Rick said. "Sorry?"

"What do you think?" she said. "Edward's sweet, but I just have to crack the whip once in a while or he'd be runnin' my whole life. Now let's talk about you. Why are you singin' in a place like this, Rick Morley?"

"Let's hope I won't be much longer," he told her with disarming honesty.

It was easier than he had dreamed. He took her home and she asked him in for

a night-cap. He accepted immediately.

It was a huge, pretentious house, no doubt expressing the late Mr. Dawson's ideas of decor. But to Rick, whose pleasing baritone and attraction for women hadn't paid off recently, it was very beautiful indeed.

Lora Lee looked beautiful to him, too, if a little blurred at the edges, after the last double Scotch.

He was still playing it safe, though. She was a lush armful of woman, but he only ran a finger down the soft inner curve of her elbow.

"You're bad medicine for a guy like me, Lora Lee," he told her. "And I'm not in your league. Look. I'm strictly for nowhere as a singer. I belong in a dive like the Three Kings. I eat with the right fork, but only because I've watched people like you."

He sighed gently, "I'm a heel, too, or I wouldn't be here. Your friends would spot me for one, just as Trask did. Still—right now I'd like to take you in my arms and kiss you until we were both blind-drunk on kisses, instead of Scotch!"

"Why don't you?" Lora Lee whispered.

They were locked in each other's arms when the door opened. A slim, dark girl in a red housecoat murmured something and fled.

"That's just Janie, my companion-secretary. *She* doesn't matter." Lora Lee's voice was as thick as honey. "Kiss me again, Ricky. . . ."

TWO WEEKS later they were married. Very quietly, in another state, to avoid publicity. Mr. Trask and Janie Flood were the only witnesses to the ceremony.

Within three months Rick Morley knew that he was the pigeon, not Lora Lee.

For all her sugar-plum sweetness and yielding ways, there was a core of iron in Lora Lee. She paid lavishly for what she wanted, but she always got what she paid for. She had bought him, and Rick found that he had a full-time job, twenty-four hours a day, catering to her wants. And he was sick of her, bored, fed up.

They hadn't half completed their round-the-world honeymoon cruise when he realized that Lora Lee wasn't just a fragile Southern flower, but an ill woman.

What ailed her, he didn't know. Her health, like her age, he supposed cynically, was a state secret, shared only by her maid and the ship's doctor. But the hell with it. Aging queens of beauty had a right to their off days.

Long live Lora Lee's vanity, too, he thought. It had given him quite a lot of freedom in Cairo, and in Lisbon, and in Cannes. . . .

Of course, there were times when he'd taken too much freedom and she had hauled in the golden leash very abruptly indeed. But he figured things were working out well enough. Until the day, shortly after their homecoming, when she sent for him—much too early in the morning.

He had a monumental hangover, and his wretchedness was sharpened by Janie Flood's being her emissary.

He didn't dare think much about Janie. She was just a slim, olive-skinned girl with soft eyes and a figure her demure frocks couldn't detract from. And yet her voice, her presence in the same room, did something to Rick that nothing had ever done before.

"Lora Lee wants to see you," she told him. "The storm warnings are out, Rick. I thought I'd better warn you before hand."

"Thanks," Rick said. "If it weren't for you, Janie, I don't think I could stick it. But we're both in the same boat, aren't we?"

She backed away from him with an inscrutable look.

"It's a first-class boat, Rick. Strictly a luxury liner. And you took passage of your own free will, remember? So be careful."

"The cruise doesn't come up to specifications," he told her. "But you do, Janie. Darling, it's happening to you, too, isn't it?"

For a crazy minute there wasn't any distance between them, and she was in his arms. Then she pulled herself away, cool as porcelain.

"She's waiting for you, Rick. This never happened. It won't, ever again. There's too much at stake, my friend!"

A strange thing was happening to Rick Morley. "I love you, Janie," he said. "To hell with Lora Lee! Her money doesn't mean a damn any more. There's

just you now, darling. I mean it."

She stared at him, her face as expressionless as a doll's.

"I'm sorry, Rick," she said. "But it's no good. You're going on, being a devoted husband to a sick woman who loves you. She is a sick woman, Rick. She's an advanced diabetic, and she needs peace of mind as much as she does her daily shots of insulin."

"I'm getting out of the picture. It isn't decent or safe for me to stay on now. We both know that. Now go upstairs and make your peace."

Such a little, soft-eyed creature, Rick thought—but what a will! And decency, too. Would he ever be good enough for a girl like Janie Flood?

The unreconstructed Rick was still functioning, though, as he entered his wife's room. He bent over Lora Lee and kissed her, hating the soft, flabby creature in the Hollywood bed as he did.

"Sorry you're feeling lousy, darling." He touched her lifeless blonde hair as if it were the most beautiful hair in the world. "I guess we made too big an evening of it last night. I'll have to take better care of you hereafter."

Her blue eyes were the only live things in her pale, puffy face. "Never mind the sweet talk, Ricky," she said. Her voice was weak. "I don't feel too lousy to get right down to cases. I got a phone call from that gamblin' place where you spend your spare time, and my money. I made that last I.O.U. of yours good—but it is the last one, honey! You've been out-smartin' yourself in a lot of ways, because you know I'm crazy about you. I am, but not that crazy."

She flung her arm over her mouth, and he felt a moment's real compassion.

"I'm sorry, Lora Lee," he said humbly, and almost meant it. "I told you I was a heel—remember?"

"I remember," she said. "But I figured that even heels could come down to earth. I guess I figured wrong."

She took from her night table a sheaf of bills, and he didn't have to look at them to know what they were.

Tailor's bills, florist's bills, all the bills he thought he'd been so clever about altering, maneuvering, with a cut-back here and there, for a few paltry hundreds.

And worst of all was the canceled check she tapped with a crimson fingernail. A check he had altered, very skillfully, he had thought, from one to seven hundred dollars.

"If you'd given me a bigger allowance," he said when he could control his voice, "or had made a decent settlement, so I wouldn't be dependent on that damn monthly check for street money . . ."

"Stop kidding both of us!" There wasn't even contempt in the whisper. "This is the payoff, Ricky. Just as soon as I'm on my feet again I'll divorce you. Edward will see that you get your allowance—but there won't be any settlement."

She moistened her dry lips, nodded to the thermos bottle on the table.

He poured water for her, held her head as she gulped it down thirstily. And then the miracle of love out-miracled itself. He heard himself say, "Skip the allowance, Lora Lee. I don't want it. I just want out. I've given you a hell of a rotten deal, but even a guy like me might change, if the incentive was strong enough. . . ."

She stared at him incredulously, her eyes wide.

"So it's Janie. I knew you were makin' a play for her, but *this!*" She began to laugh. "Lordy, it's funny. You're a bigger fool than I thought you were. Janie and you, leadin' the simple life in some West Side walkup . . ."

She stopped laughing, looking like death. Her hand groped toward the night table.

"Time for my shot," she said in a far-away voice. "Anna knows. Call her." Then, dull-eyed, she spoke again, when he had rung. "My life's in your hands, Ricky. Take good care of it, for your own sake. . . ."

She was barely conscious when Anna appeared. But Anna worked fast dissolving and injecting the insulin. Rick watched with morbid fascination. And he recorded, automatically, everything Anna said. Anna was a good teacher.

"It is important that you be able to do this," she explained, "should the need arise. Madame's condition is not good. She is like a child in many ways. But now that you know the graveness of her *malaise*, you will be on guard, yes?"

THE DOCTOR arrived before Lora Lee regained consciousness, and within the hour she was installed in a hospital suite.

When Rick returned from the hospital, late that night, Janie was gone.

How terribly Lora Lee had misjudged her, he thought. She'd been smart enough about him, almost from the beginning. But she couldn't estimate Janie's integrity.

He didn't hear from Janie until the night before Lora Lee came home from the hospital.

They met in a little French restaurant in the upper west Twenties, not far from where Janie had a share in a small furnished apartment. There was an empty, darkish booth, and in its insecure privacy they clung to each other desperately.

Then Janie said, "This isn't fair or decent. But, Rick, we have a right to this minute, haven't we?"

Later, they sat hand in hand on the shabby daybed in Janie's living room for an hour before her room-mates returned. Janie was firm when his kisses pressed her too urgently.

"No, darling," she told him. "I'm not being coy. But you're Lora Lee's husband, and she may live a long time, with her insulin injections."

"Her normal life-time, as long as she sticks to her diet and her shots," he agreed. "But that doesn't matter, Janie. She knows about us, darling. She's going to divorce me."

"Divorce you?"

"There won't be any settlement, any allowance," he told her with half-rueful pride. "We'll start from scratch. See what you've done to me, Janie? Turned me from a heel into an almost decent guy."

Her silence rang a warning bell, but he wasn't listening.

"Are you crazy, Rick?" She pushed him away.

He was beginning to understand at last.

"Why do you think I ever took a job like that?" she demanded fiercely. "Because I liked it where the cream was thick—and where I'd meet men with money. Money—that's the only thing that matters to people like us, Rick. Stop kidding yourself and me!"

Lora Lee had said the same thing to

him, he remembered. The same thing. Then Janie's voice softened, and she was in his arms again.

"I love you, Rick. But how long would it last for either of us this way? The money's still there, darling, if you're careful with your shots. And I don't mean your shots—I mean Lora Lee's. . . ."

It was all open and above board now. Nobody kidding anybody any more.

Rick felt clammy cold, though Janie was clinging to him, and the cough and hammer in the radiator told him that the steam was coming up.

He knew now precisely what she meant. But it still didn't make any difference. He had to have Janie. Had to. . . .

"It'll take some planning and timing. Until Anna's next day off. And don't try to get in touch with—with the house. No matter what happens, Janie, promise me."

IT DIDN'T take so much planning and timing, after all. For everything played into his hands when Lora Lee came home from the hospital.

She was very weak, but her shrewd eyes told him she knew he'd been bracing himself all evening with brandies.

"Relax, Ricky," she said. "And let's call a truce for the next few days. We're both getting what we want, aren't we? Anna. . . ."

"I'll ring for her."

The brandies were wearing off, and he couldn't endure being alone with her.

"Don't bother. Anna had to go to Providence this afternoon. Her mother *would* have to have an emergency operation right now! So you'll have to give me my shots."

It was happening too quickly. His mouth was so dry he couldn't speak.

Lora Lee moved fretfully against the pillows. "Well? Stop sulkin' and fix the injection. Or am I askin' too much of you?"

He managed a propitiatory smile. "Of course not. But you ought to have brought a nurse home with you, Lora Lee. Dr. Gaines should have insisted on it." Somehow, just saying that made him feel better. "Let me call the registry now."

"No." Lora Lee was still cracking the whip. "If I'd wanted one, I'd have

brought her along. I'm sick to death of bein' bullied by those cheery Florence Nightingales."

"It's your funeral," he heard himself say, and the words echoed horribly inside his head.

"Then stop lookin' as if it were your own," she advised. "You ought to cut down on the brandies, Rick. That's a luxury you won't be able to afford much longer."

Someone was tapping at the door. It was Caroline, the parlor maid, bringing Lora Lee her thermos bottle of hot milk.

Rick recoiled from the light, that might show up the cold sweat gleaming on his brow and upper lip.

"Be right with you, dear," he called to Lora Lee from the dressing room, where the electric sterilizer puffed and steamed.

This is it, chum. You can't go through this again. Make up your mind. Yes or no. Lora Lee or Janie. . . .

But when he filled the syringe, five minutes later, his hand was perfectly steady. It was only his insides that crawled with fear and self-contempt.

Lora Lee had finished her hot milk, and Caroline had raised the windows.

"If you need anything, Mrs. Morley, just ring."

"Mr. Morley will leave his door open," Lora Lee said. "But don't let me oversleep. Mr. Trask is coming at ten."

Lora Lee smiled at him as he thrust the needle into her hip, as Anna had taught him to do.

"Sorry I was nasty," she said unexpectedly. "I've got a mean streak in me, Rick. And I've a funny feeling that I ought to tell you something pretty important now, tonight. . . ."

"Save it. You're awfully tired, Lora Lee."

"Awfully tired. It'll keep till morning, I guess. But you've been pretty sweet from time to time, Rick. Thanks for those times, anyway."

HE LEFT her, reeling himself with exhaustion, and presently fell asleep.

Dawn was paling when a hysterical voice roused him.

"Wake up, Mr. Morley. *Wake up!* Your wife. . . . I've already called the doctor. . . . the poor thing. . . ."

Lora Lee must have been dead for some hours. Her flesh was marble cold, even to *his* hand. She looked smaller, thinner now, somehow. He stood over her, staring motionlessly, as the doctor arrived.

"But it can't have happened," Rick protested to Dr. Gaines. "I tell you I gave her the right injection—the forty units of insulin, damn you! I planned something else, but I didn't have the guts to go through with it! The autopsy will show that I gave her the insulin. . . ."

He babbled that over and over again to Dr. Gaines, and to the others, who came later.

"Pull yourself together, man!" Gaines said contemptuously. "If you gave her the proper dose, the hypodermic will bear out your story. But as for the autopsy—Lora Lee has the last laugh, poor, silly girl! She always kept a cache of chocolates in her bed-side table. Couldn't resist them, even last night. They'll have canceled out the insulin you say you gave her. But the hypodermic, man! Where is it?"

Hysteria shook him as he remembered.

"I dropped it after rinsing it out. I was shaky as hell, I tell you. The pieces are in the waste-basket. But what if they don't show anything?"

They didn't. He had rinsed it with the repetitious thoroughness of a half-drunk man. So thoroughly that not even the experts downtown could find a trace of insulin on the fragments.

It was touch and go during the inquest. But there was insufficient evidence to hold him for trial, despite all the damning disclosures.

Edward Trask represented him, sedate and disapproving, but shrewd as an old grey fox. He coached Janie Flood very beautifully indeed. She made such an excellent impression that only Rick's love for her kept him from cracking up, shouting out her perfidy.

But he loved her too much. And it was coming out all right, anyway.

He readily believed that, until the night after the inquest when Trask came to see him.

Rick welcomed him shakily.

"God, I'm glad to see you, Trask. This house is a tomb. Have a brandy and tell

me how soon the estate can be settled up."

"The estate?" Trask coughed gently, declining his hospitality. "That's what I came about, Rick. There is no estate, my boy. Henry knew Lora Lee was inclined to be impetuous, so an annuity seemed the wisest way of providing for her. That ceased, of course, at her death."

Rick absorbed that at last.

"This house—the Long Island place?"

"Both held in trust. Mr. Dawson was deeply interested in young people of talent and ambition. This house is to be converted into music studios for young men of limited means. The East Hampton place will be their summer retreat. But you mustn't feel hurried. Take a month, if you wish, to find other quarters."

"And Janie?" Rick asked numbly.

"She sent you her kindest greetings, and hopes that you will be the first to congratulate us on our engagement. We both feel that we are very well suited to each other. . . ."

"You are," said Rick. "I'd call it the perfect mating. *Get out, damn you, and tell her that!*"

Trask paused at the door.

"Just for my own curiosity, Rick, did you or didn't you give Lora Lee her forty units of insulin? You're perfectly safe now."

Rick's smile was ugly. "But are *you*? That's the sixty-four-dollar question, Trask."

The heavy door thudded shut, and Rick started up the mahogany staircase. That was haunted, too, by Lora Lee's clicking heels and her scent, and the ghost of her laughter, as she would trip, now and then, over a fabulously long skirt.

Her rose-tiled bathroom wasn't haunted. It was just lifeless and empty—except for the medicine cabinet, which held what Rick wanted.

He emptied the new vial of sleeping pills into his palm, swallowed them.

"Coming, darling," he said—as he'd said so many times, so unwillingly. But this time it was different. This time it was for keeps. He wasn't even frightened. For Lora Lee was kind and warm and loving. Forgiving, too.

He needed her badly. For it was getting very dark and cold, where he was. . . .

DETECTIVE TALES

ON THE SPOT

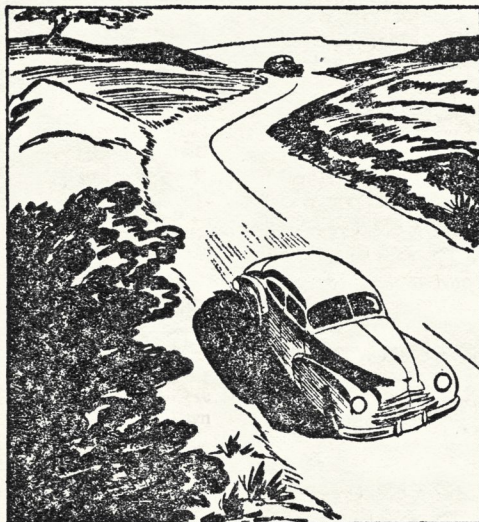
For Next Month



It would be hard to imagine why anyone would want to kill twelve-year-old Jenny. But someone had—cold, brutal Henry Thompson. A whole city is aghast, and Detective Don Lane swears that someone will pay. . . .



The Thompsons, as neighbors, are among the first questioned. Don Lane notices that blonde, hard-eyed Mrs. Thompson seems nervous. But it's hard to get anything out of her. She's too afraid of her apelike husband. . . .



Don Lane, certain that Thompson is the killer, trails Thompson on a cross-country trip. Thompson is heading for Florida, with, suspiciously, a pocketful of money. Where did he get all that money? Lane wonders.

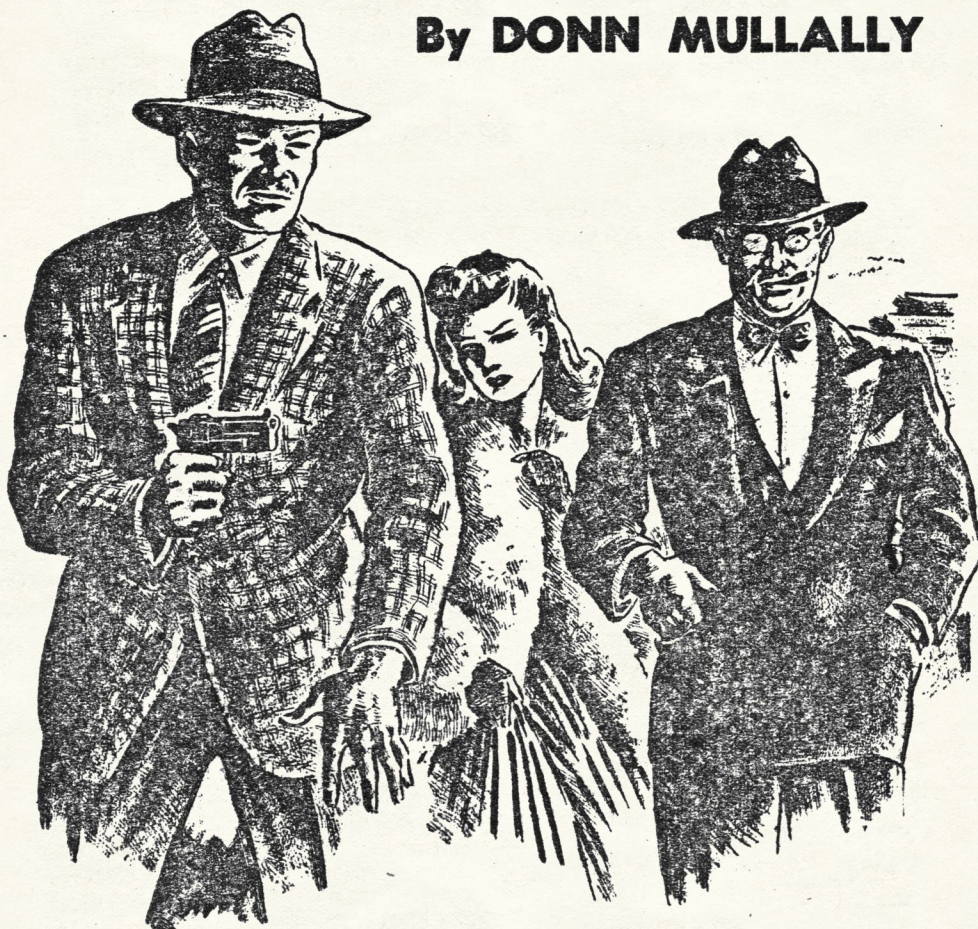


Later, Don Lane trails the Thompsons to a lonely spot. Evidence-minded Lane has his camera ready for anything, but the picture he gets astounds even him—a portrait of Thompson killing his wife!

The conclusion of this story will be told in Dorothy Dunn's dramatic murder novel, "Death Mask for Jenny" . . . featured in the October issue of DETECTIVE TALES. Out September 25th.

HIGH, LOW, DEATH —AND THE DAME!

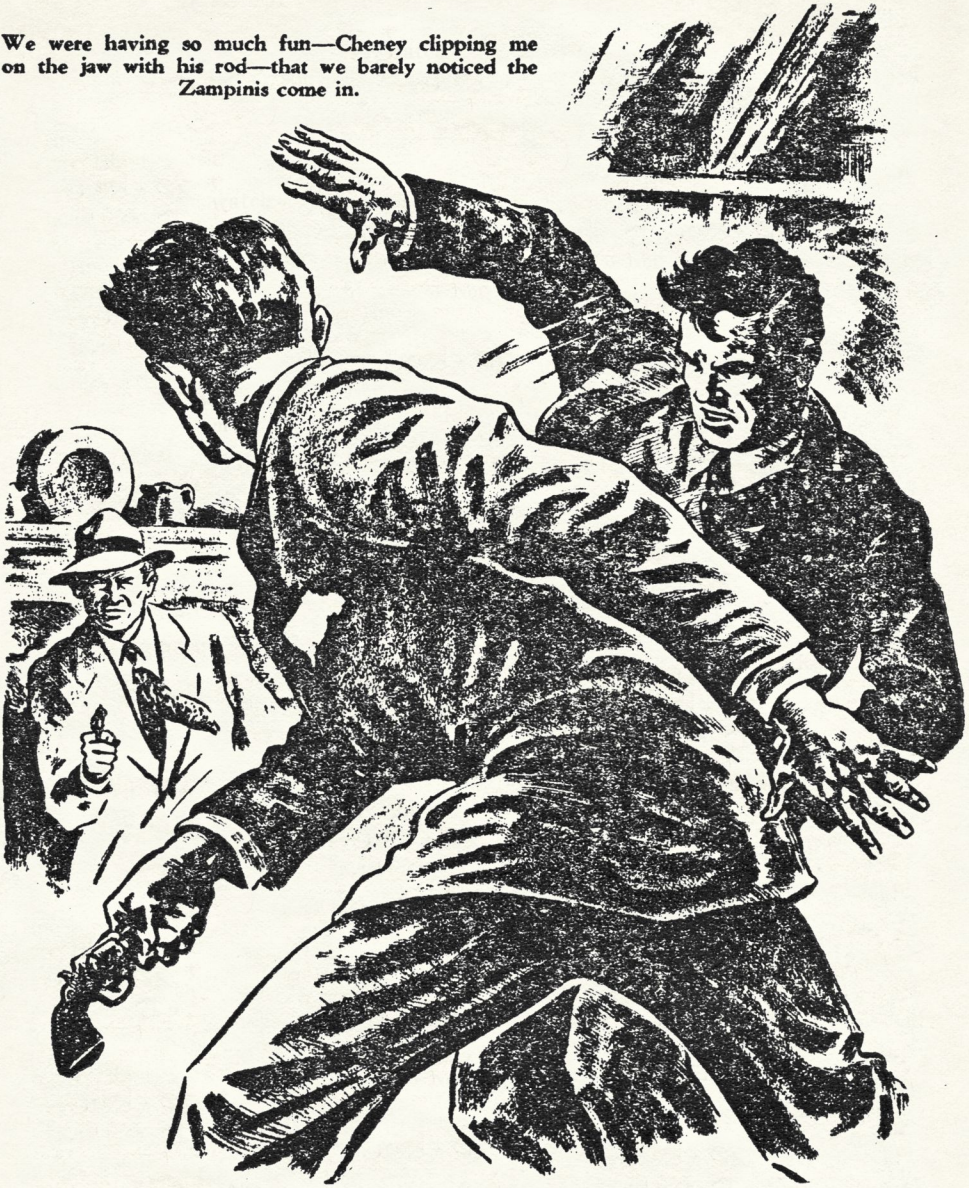
By **DONN MULLALLY**



Fast-Paced Crime Novelette

Taken separately, neither Elsa—that was her name—nor the missing century notes would have bothered happy-go-lucky Joe Feeney. But when both girl and money disappeared together—it was time to go sticking one short, stubborn Irish nose into the kind of trouble that could only mean bigger income taxes for the undertakers!

We were having so much fun—Cheney clipping me on the jaw with his rod—that we barely noticed the Zampinis come in.



CHAPTER ONE

\$500 Worth of Trouble

I WOKE up with the sun shining in my mouth and my feet out a window of the Saint Francis Hotel. Down below me, on Powell Street, a cable-car joker was making with his bell, but I didn't hear him. I only felt the tinny clang—a sharp pain in my noggin.

Across the street I could see stenographers and shop girls eating lunch in Union Square, with pigeons clinging around on the mooch for the crusts from the gals' sandwiches.

All this was just as I'd planned it for two years while I sweated out an oil

strike in Arabia. Everything—including my hangover.

Then I tried to move. I felt as if I'd spent the night in an iron maiden. My back had settled into the contour of the hotel easy chair. Easy chair, they call it! I had to pry myself loose. Which gave me time to think . . . about what I was doing my first night in San Francisco sleeping in a chair. Boy, *that* was a switch!

Elsa Cheney.

I heaved myself out of the chair and looked around the room. The bed. Elsa had been there, the last I remembered. She hadn't had any place else to go so gallant Joe here—me—I said she could have my sack. She wasn't in it now. There wasn't a wrinkle on the spread to show she had ever been.

The bathroom door was open. I stumbled in and ran cold water over my head. That helped, but my back still felt as if I'd slept on a waffle iron. Through the open door I could see my suit coat draped over a straight chair. I gulped. A nice, clean kid like Elsa, she wouldn't . . .

Just the same I wobbled out and counted the money in my wallet. What wasn't there I could've spent last night. I started breathing again. A half-empty fifth was on the dresser, with two water glasses. Lipstick on one of them. So I hadn't dreamed this Elsa. I wondered why she'd taken a powder and if I'd ever see her again.

There was a mixed-up babe. Dimly I recalled what she'd told me about her husband and the dirty shake he'd given her. She'd come all the way out here from New Jersey on her own and she didn't even know where to locate the bum.

Vince Cheney—that was his name. A small-time hood, I figured him. He'd married her while he was working a gambling joint back in Jersey. Now he was trying to give her the brush. All Elsa knew for sure about her husband was that she *had* to find him, and that he'd once dropped a name—Zampini. She thought he might be on this Zampini's payroll.

I'd picked up Elsa in a little bar on Bush Street. My first pickup in two years. My first smell of an honest-to-God American bar with real bourbon—

not distilled camel sweat. So I was easy. I even spent a couple bucks tipping a bartender into telling me what any bar fly knows: that Zampini runs a roadhouse across the bay in Contra Costa County. Called the Pin Oak. You can lose your shirt there.

I'd checked bus schedules for Elsa. She was going over first thing today.

I decided what Joe Feeny needed was a cup of coffee. I slipped into my coat, fumbled absently for cigarettes. No smokes, but I came up with a sheet of paper. I held it in front of my puffy eyes, read, "Dear Joe . . ."

IT WENT on, but I had to read it twice: "You have been so terribly kind, I know you won't mind my *borrowing* the money I took from your wallet. It was exactly five hundred dollars and I'll return every penny as soon as I find Vince." It was signed, "Affectionately, Elsa."

I read it three times. I mean, I couldn't believe it. I broke out my wallet again and counted the money in sight. That was okay. But the wallet had a *hidden* compartment for carrying reserve. I'd had ten one-hundred-dollar bills stowed behind the flap. There were five left.

Of all the louse stunts I'd ever had pulled on me, this was the prize. I take a dame off the streets, feed her, let her sleep in my bed, and she kisses me off for five hundred hard-earned bucks.

I started for the phone, then changed my mind. I could see myself explaining to some wise cop how come Elsa spent the night in my room. I could hear the horse laugh he'd give me: "You guys sure go out of your way to get rolled!"

Elsa's name would make the police blotter, and then they might even catch her, and I'd have to prove I was out those five C's.

It looked like this was a rhubarb I'd better settle for myself.

The desk gave me the address of a U-Drive garage and I hopped a cab up there. The little character who rented me a car didn't want anything for security except a pint of my blood and fifty bucks; if I brought the car back all in one piece I could have the blood. But he was real helpful. He told me how to find Contra Costa County, and he also fixed me up

with a fast temporary driver's license.

I swung my rented heap out into the San Francisco traffic, heading for the Bay Bridge. If I hadn't been so hot, I probably would have been scared to death. In the first six block I figured I'd lost my deposit on this jalopy about twelve times. But I made it across the bridge and through Berkeley. My hands were wet on the wheel and my mouth tasted as if I'd been sampling oil sand. I needed a drink. But worse, I needed that five hundred bucks.

I drove out a four-lane highway, through a tunnel, past hot-dog stands, saloons and fancy roadhouses, just like the little man at the garage had said. The Pin Oak was easy once I found Walnut Creek. It was about two miles on down the road, an outsize California-Spanish ranch house on the outside. Adobe brick, wagon wheels and cactus.

The interior of Zampini's gambling hell and grill was strictly modern: everything very sharp and bright, with a lot of chrome and black leatherette. I dragged my feet through the heavy carpet to a pretty hat-check girl, then browsed until I found the bar. No Elsa Cheney, up to now. I had a side bet with myself that there wouldn't be.

There was an empty perch and a bartender to take my money. The joint smelled of gardenias, or maybe it was the blonde next to me.

The barkeep was a hard man to pin down. It took three drinks to register. "Is your boss around tonight?" I asked. "Who?" As if he hadn't heard me.

"Your boss, Mr. Zampini."

His eyes glazed automatically. "I don't know," he said, starting to walk away.

I nudged a five across the bar, holding one corner. "Think you could find out?"

He looked from the fin to me. "Find out what?"

I asked him again, nice. "Mr. Zampini, is he in the club?"

He took the five to the cash register, returned with my change. All of it. "Take your drinking some place else, Doc," he said.

I considered lifting myself over his bar, but the blonde next to me spoiled it. "I beg your pardon," she said casually, "but you wished to see Mr. Zampini?"

Until she spoke, Blondie had been part of the highly phony atmosphere. I took a minute to get the picture. Large blue eyes, a bobbed nose and a general look that she'd been around said plenty. Her hair fell over her shoulders in a long page-boy. Otherwise she was naked clear down to here. You know what I mean: one of those strapless evening gowns, dark maroon.

"Yeah," I admitted.

"Why?"

What'd I have to lose? "I'm trying to locate a friend of mine. I understand Zampini might know where he is."

She finished her drink like a lady and slid off the bar stool, smiling. "We'll see what we can do."

I FOLLOWED her through a brace of speakeasy-type doors. Whoever she was, she rated a salaam from all hands. We crossed a game room, already crowded with sucker trade, and went through another door guarded by two narrow-faced torpedoes.

We seemed to have entered a secretary's office, with filing cabinets and a desk. My guide passed the word over the squawk-box on the desk, as follows: Louis. Nora. I have a man out here who wants to see you."

She released the key, and the box croaked: "Okay, send him in."

The buzzer-lock in the door made a mad rattlesnake noise. Nora gave me the nod. I said, "Thanks a million, Miss," and opened the door.

This was like nothing outside the movies. Oval, with a domed ceiling that made me feel as though I were standing in an egg. The walls were covered with cork, fitted with strips of copper. There wasn't a window or a straight line in the room. At a kidney-shaped desk was a man I took for Louis Zampini.

He was good looking, about forty-five, heavy-set. There was a lot of grey in his hair. It set off the dark color of his skin. He was in a tux and wore rimless glasses with heavy, dark lenses. I couldn't tell whether he was looking at me or the paper he held. I steamed across the room to one of the leather chairs.

"What can I do for you?"

"I'm trying to find a friend of mine,"

I explained. "He told me if I ever wanted to get in touch with him you'd know where he was."

The overhead light reflected off the dark glasses. "What's the name?"

"Vince Cheney."

He laughed. "Cheney, huh? How much is he into you for?"

I shook my head. "Five—he doesn't owe me anything."

Silence. Then Zampini grunted, "Nora know what you wanted?"

I gave him a negative shake again. With those glasses it was like talking to God. Zampini pressed a button on his desk and the door buzzer chattered. One of the guards from the outer office entered quietly.

Zampini said, "Show the gentleman downstairs, Mike."

I stood up, leaned on the edge of his desk. "Wait a minute. How about Cheney?"

He laughed again, something like a lunger coughing. "Take my advice—quit while you're ahead."

The gungel turned me loose near the hat-check stand, with: "Blow, Mac!" California hospitality.

I claimed my hat and Mike lost interest in me. I watched him go back upstairs, then sneaked into the bar. I wanted to see more of Nora. But she wasn't around.

I cornered the bartender. "Look—the lady I was talking to, remember?"

"You mean Mrs. Zampini?"

"Yeah," I replied. "She said I was to buy you a drink."

I tossed a buck on the mahogany.

I walked out to the parking lot and got in my bus, started racking back to the city. It didn't seem so far this way—probably because I was busy digesting my interview with Louis Zampini. Frankly, it made me a little sick.

The only thing I could see on the credit side was that I knew now that Vincent Cheney hadn't been just a name Elsa had picked out of the air when she was pitching me. Cheney existed. He might even be Elsa's husband, like she said.

But I had to find him before I could expect him to lead me to Elsa and my five hundred.

I turned the car in at the garage and

walked on down to the hotel. I was in no hurry now. Joe Feeny had all the time in the world.

The elevator boy said something about it being a good evening. I growled at the kid as I stepped out of his cage. Where did he get off, telling me what kind of an evening it was?

I inserted my room key in the door, turned the lock—and stepped back as though the knob were charged with electricity. I was getting sensitive, maybe highly nervous; but when the lock didn't click, something had to be wrong. It couldn't be anything simple like me forgetting to lock the door when I left that afternoon. There was someone inside waiting for me. Trouble. More trouble.

I turned the knob, let the door float open slowly. The light from the hall fell in a widening beam across my darkened room. I'd called this one.

SPOTLIGHTED in the easy chair was Elsa. Her eyes were open wide, staring at me, at the light in back of me. For a second my stomach stood on its head. I thought she was dead.

Then I saw her breathe, her mouth open. "Joe!" she cried.

I came into the room and flipped on the overhead lights. Before I had the door closed she was in my arms, clinging to me, saying my name over and over. You'd have thought the kid was glad to see me.

I wrestled her out to arm's length, noticed for the first time that her eyes were red, puffed. From crying? Her upper lip was swollen so that her mouth twisted in an off-center grin.

"Give me my five hundred," I told her, "and then I'll ask you what happened."

Her head wilted. "I—I haven't got it, Joe."

I shoved her, maybe harder than I meant to. Maybe she was acting a little for me. She sat down hard in the overstuffed chair.

"That's great," I told her. "You better be thinking of some way to get it back."

"I can't, Joe," she sobbed. "He—he took it."

"He, who?"

"I don't know."

"That's a help." I stood there swearing to myself, watched this dame turn on the

waterworks. Maybe she'd been crying all afternoon. She had plenty left for softening me up.

"All right, all right," I shouted. "Tell me the story. Maybe I'll bawl, too."

She did. It was pretty badly mangled, but I put it together like this:

It seemed that after she ran out on me, she'd gone right to the bus depot and bought herself a ride to Walnut Creek, the closest stop to Zampini's club. She'd had a few minutes to kill till bus time and stepped into a little bar for a cup of coffee.

A couple minutes later a man sat down at the bar beside her. Big coincidence: She recognized him as a friend of Cheney's, a man her husband had worked with in New Jersey. Naturally they got to talking, and this character said he had a car and would be glad to drive Elsa over to Zampini's place.

She'd turned in her ticket and gone with this man to a hotel garage where he said he had his car parked. She actually got into his car before he turned on her.

He wanted to know where Cheney was. He claimed Elsa's husband owed him five thousand dollars. When Elsa told him she didn't know, that she was looking for Vince herself, this character got ugly, slugged her a couple of times and rifled her purse. Then he booted her out of the car and drove off.

Of course Elsa had tried to trace him through the garage, but the attendant had no idea who the guy was.

That was the story I bought for five hundred bucks. At least it cost me that much to hear it.

But that wasn't all. Elsa said her own money was gone, too. She had no place to stay again.

I laughed as if I was being tickled with the muzzle of a .38. "You're the damndest dame I ever met, baby. You take Joe for five hundred bucks, then expect to come back here and cry him out of his bed! Besides, you're all wet about not having a place to go. They've got a women's section over at the City Prison. It may not be gaudy, but it's not too neat, either."

The tears were gone now. The kid was going to use logic. "That won't get your

five hundred back, Joe," she said quietly.

"That's a laugh," I said. "If I keep you out of jail, I suppose you'll get my money for me."

"I could try," she said. "If we can find Vince, he'll know who that man is."

"Wait a minute," I cut in. "You mean you don't even know this joker's name?"

She shook her head. "I think it was Larry something."

"Something," I snorted. "That's a big help."

"Please be serious, Joe," Elsa pleaded. "Help me find Vincent. That's why I took the money in the first place. I thought—"

"Yeah," I said. "I'm glad we're getting around to that. Why *did* you take the money?"

Elsa was talking to the nervous hands in her lap: "I thought it would make you follow me. I need your help, Joe."

I turned and walked to the window, watched the lights on the cars nudging their way along Powell Street, leaned my hot little head against the cool glass. "That does it," I said, my words steaming the window. "I've heard everything. You steal my dough so I'll follow you. Then you let yourself get picked up by some other guy, and he takes you for the money. Now, the pitch is, I'm to help you find your old man." I turned and looked at her. "Lady, do I look like that big a chump?"

Her mouth quivered, that twisted grin on her swollen lips, her eyes starting to fill.

"No," I said. "Don't answer that. I suppose you're right. If I ever want to see those five yards, I'll have to play ball."

CHAPTER TWO

A Friend of Cheney's

I SENT the bellhop out to get an ice bag for Elsa's lip. Then I tucked her in my bed with the bag drooping under her nose like a walrus mustache. I even had a bedtime story for her—about my interview with Zampini.

"He knew a lot he wasn't telling," I declared. "But you can't do much with a guy like that."

Then I told her how I had met Mrs. Zampini. "I think she's okay. If we handle it right, she might help us."

Elsa perked up a little.

I explained: "One way or another I'll arrange for you and Mrs. Zampini to get together. You lay it on the line about Vince, how you've come all the way from Jersey and so forth. I got a hunch that if she doesn't know where your husband is, she can probably jimmy it out of Zampini."

Elsa's hand reached out for mine. Like a dope, junior-grade, I held it for her.

"Now, catch some shut-eye," I told her gently. "We want you presentable tomorrow night. Maybe we can have dinner at the club."

She nodded and wriggled deeper into the covers. I flipped out the light and went to my chair by the window. I had a hell of a time going to sleep.

* * *

By the next evening Elsa looked human again. Perhaps she did it with makeup. I wouldn't know. The lip would have fooled me, and we'd been shopping for an evening gown. There was some lace on the skirt, and she showed where she was supposed to. I whistled when I saw her.

It was a picture-postcard evening. The air was clear, and neon lights made Oakland look like a fancy box of tinsel-wrapped candy as we drove over the bridge.

This time I took Elsa with me when I went through the funny business with the doorman and the hat-check girl at the Pin Oak.

Since we weren't on Zampini's sucker list, our table was way back in one corner of the dining room. Which was okay with me. We ordered a drink. The waiter had already figured me for a small tip, so we wouldn't be bothered by him.

As soon as we had our squatter's rights on the table, I meant to see if I could find Mrs. Zampini. I was explaining this to Elsa when I happened to glance across the room. Chatting with the headwaiter was my lady. Tonight it was a sequin creation that fit her like a coat of shellac. She had a young guy in tow.

Elsa grabbed my arm. "That's the one," she said excitedly. "The man who took your money."

I tried to see every man in the room. "Where? Which one?"

Her eyes pointed out Mrs. Zampini's boy. "There, with that woman."

"You're positive?"

"Absolutely."

"Good enough. I'll be seeing you."

I started across the room, making an effort to look casual. But my luck ran out. Mrs. Zampini's escort spotted Elsa. I watched his eyes travel from her to me. He said something to Nora and made tracks. The last I saw of him and my five C's was a pair of taillights taking off down the highway. When I came back Mrs. Zampini seemed faintly amused.

I tacked on a smile. "Sorry I chased him away."

"You're the friend of Vince Cheney's, aren't you?" She barely made it a question. "Louis told me."

"I hope there wasn't any trouble."

"Trouble?" she pouted. "No . . ."

"Look," I said, remembering why I was there, "how about me buying a drink?"

She didn't scream, so I jockeyed her through the tables to where Elsa was sitting. I introduced them, watched the girls trade price tags with their eyes.

"Elsa," I explained to Mrs. Zampini, "is Vince's wife." No help from the audience. "As a matter of fact, she's the real reason I'm trying to find him."

Elsa took over, told her story very well.

"I wish I could help you," Nora responded sweetly, "but I'm afraid I can't. Louis would have told Mr. Feeny where to find Vince if he knew."

"But I thought they were friends," I argued.

"They *were*."

I said, "What happened?"

Mrs. Zampini speared the olive in her Martini. "I'd rather not say," she said, and smiled.

Elsa looked worried. "Is Vince in trouble?"

THERE'S plenty of animal in two dames even a little bit at each other's throats. I can't put it in words, but Elsa's

eyes seemed to take hold of the other girl and shake her out of that deadpan act.

"I shouldn't tell you this," Nora finally said. She twirled her empty glass by its stem, frowning. "You know Louis makes book. Well, Vince was in the organization. As I understand it, Vince had to pay off on several long shots, about fifty thousand dollars. That was all right with Louis. When a long shot wins he makes a killing, anyway. But somehow he found out Vince was double-crossing him, pocketing the money. Exit Vince."

"You think Louis caught up with him?" I asked.

Nora smiled and shook her head. "No, I'm sure he didn't. He was too unhappy after Vince disappeared."

I was kicking that around when I realized we had another guest. Zampini. I scrambled to my feet, introduced Elsa.

Those glasses of his still gave me trouble. Right then I was wondering what was behind the grin he turned my way. "Any luck with Cheney?" he asked.

"No luck. I guess we'll have to put a detective on it."

"You must want him bad," Zampini remarked, sitting down with us.

Elsa explained, "I'm the one who wants him."

Zampini looked at her with interest. At least, I figured there was interest under those dark cheaters. He smiled at me. "Now it comes out. What were you giving me yesterday?"

I told him the whole story. He heard me through, sipping a big glass of milk. It's rough in his racket—a guy can die from those ulcers. We came out even. He put down his empty glass just as I finished squaring my original lie.

"That's tough," he told Elsa. Then, to me: "Give me your phone number, Joe. Maybe I'll hear something."

"We're at the St. Francis," I said. "I'll appreciate anything you can do."

He pushed back from the table. "Don't count on it," he growled. He was off, Nora after him.

Elsa and I exchanged a look. The strain showed in her face. It didn't seem she was much closer to finding her man. I said, "How about some chow?"

She moved her head negatively.

"Okay," I said, "let's travel."

ALL the way back to San Francisco my mind was occupied with one thought. For me, that's a jam. I couldn't forget what Nora Zampini had told us about Vince Cheney's double-cross. All I know about gangsters is what I read in the funnies; but in my book nobody taps a big wheel like Zampini for fifty grand. I didn't say anything to Elsa, but I wouldn't've given a pair of dirty socks for our chances of finding her husband alive.

I came into our room with an armload of beer in a paper sack, nudged the light switch with my elbow. The telephone was ringing. I put the bag down, answered.

Nora Zampini's voice throbbed in my ear. She was speaking fast, hushed, as though she were afraid she'd be overheard.

"One of Louis' boys just told me they'd picked up a lead on Cheney. He's staying at the Drake Shore Hotel in Carmel under the name of Victor Channing. I can keep it from Louis for a few hours if you think you and Mrs. Cheney can talk Vince into a fast fadeout."

"We'll do our best," I replied. "And thanks."

"Forget it," she said. "I'm doing this for myself. I'd hate to have Louis working on a prison road gang. He's not the type."

* * *

It was just daybreak when we made Carmel. Nothing was moving except a couple garbage trucks, a stray milk wagon. The Drake Shore was on the main drag, overlooking Monterey Bay. We didn't have any trouble finding it. Getting past the desk was another matter.

In the first place, we didn't have Channing's room number. Cheney, that is. Even if we had, it was a little early in the day for a social call.

I took Elsa by the arm and barged up to the desk. The washed-out little night clerk inspected us suspiciously. Elsa flashed her wedding ring to make it legal. "Do you have a double?" I asked.

Mouse-face eyed the ten folded in my palm, checked his roster. "Why, yes, I have!" He sounded surprised.

While I was signing the register he explained he could only let us have the room for one day. "That's all right," I told him. "Fine."

"By the way," I mentioned casually,

"I believe a friend of mine is staying here. Victor Channing?"

The hairline mustache smiled. "Indeed, yes," he exclaimed. "Mr. Channing is one of our permanent guests."

"I wonder if I could leave a message for him?"

"Certainly."

I scribbled a note, watched the clerk put it in the box of Room 608. Elsa and I crossed to the elevator where a sleepy-looking bellhop had piled our bags.

Our room was on the fourth floor with a fine view of an air-shaft. The hop went through his routine with the lights, the windows and his tip; then we were alone. When he'd had time to get back to his elevator, we moved—up two flights of stairs and down the hall to Room 608. I looked at Elsa. This was her moment. She seemed properly scared. "Ready?" I asked. She nodded.

I beat out reveille on the door. Inside, there was the sound of movement, and a sleepy voice grumbled. "Yeah."

"Western-Union, Mr. Channig," I called.

"Slide it under the door."

"Can't, sir. It's personal. You'll have to sign."

He damned it, said, "Just a minute."

We waited. Finally the door opened. He was wearing a blue silk robe. Electric blue, like the smudge of whiskers on his jaw.

Elsa's chin trembled as she said, "Vince . . ."

His eyes were cold rocks. He sneered, turning away from the door. I pushed Elsa over the threshold into the living room of a two-room suite. The bedroom door was closed.

Cheney flopped down in a green easy chair in front of a phony marble fireplace, lighted a cigarette. He glared at me. "Who's this clown?"

Elsa introduced us, set me solid with her old man. "I never would have found you if it hadn't been for Mr. Feeny," she said.

Much heavy silence. Cheney broke first. "You're taking the next train home," he told his wife.

Elsa's eyes were very bright. "I'm not!"

We watched Cheney stalk into the bed-

room, slam the door. I glanced at Elsa, expecting her to crack.

I was confused; I'll admit it. Cheney wasn't having any of her. He'd rubbed her nose in that. And yet she was going to hang on. Hang on to what, I wondered.

About ten minutes later Cheney came out of the bedroom wearing a sport jacket, slacks and saddle shoes. He stopped in front of Elsa.

"This is good-bye," he said firmly. "Believe me. Do her a favor, Feeny," he added to me. "Take her some place and explain what I mean."

He wheeled and left the room. Elsa still hadn't started to cry. Her eyes were on the door.

"Look," I said wearily, "do you really want that man?"

It was hard to believe, but I thought she said, "Yes."

"Then I guess we better go after him." Somewhere during Elsa's big scene, I'd lost sight of my five hundred bucks. I was remembering it now.

WE MISSED Cheney at the elevator, which was a man-sized lousy break. By the time the kid had brought his cage up to the sixth floor for us, Cheney was not in the lobby, either. The clerk looked at me as though I were a little nuts when I panted, "Did you see my friend Channing go through here?"

The man's jaw wobbled ineffectually. "Why," he stammered, "yes. I think he went to the garage for his car."

"What garage?" I asked.

"Through the door there," he said, pointing across the lobby.

I realized how simple I must have seemed to him. Over the door there was a small neon sign that anyone could have doped out. It said, GARAGE.

I grabbed Elsa and we sprinted across the lobby. There were a few steps, another door, and we came out in a big shed in which some very handsome crates were stacked in orderly rows. As we did, Cheney was taking off in a large, green Caddy convertible.

I didn't bother to yell at him.

Of course, the garage attendant had no idea where Cheney was bound. One thing about Carmel, the garage man explained:

There were only three directions Cheney could have gone, unless his convertible was fitted with pontoons.

I rushed Elsa to our car and we barreled out to Highway Number 1, which skirts the town. Somehow, with Zampini on the warpath up north, I had a strong hunch our boy would be headed south. I would be heading south if I were in his spot.

Our little heap shuddered along at a mad sixty miles an hour. Just once, for a few minutes, I knew I'd had a happy hunch. Far ahead of us, Cheney's green Cadillac was topping a hill. Elsa saw it, too. But that was about all we saw of Mr. C.

We kept going until the road plunged into the Big Sur country. Mountains, huge evergreens, and the Big Sur River burbling along at the margin of the road. We were well into all this scenery before we realized just how hopeless the chase idea was. Cheney had the faster car; and he knew where he was going. He might even have guessed we would follow him.

I pulled off the road at a drive-in restaurant and tried to smile at Elsa. She was a pretty grim-looking mouse—all the lipstick eaten off her mouth, her face drawn. Her eyes looked swollen, as though they wanted to cry and couldn't.

"Suppose we have some breakfast," I said. "Maybe then we'll come up with something."

"All right," she sighed, "If you want to. I don't think I'm hungry."

She wasn't, after we'd finished a couple orders of bacon and eggs. I watched her eat, as though she were a mechanical stoker. It beat talking. But we had to talk—anyway, I had to talk.

"Look," I said. "What do we know about Cheney? I mean, except my personal opinion. He's a very fancy guy, makes his loot around gambling joints working for characters like Zampini. Right now, from the looks of his setup at the hotel and his car, he's doing all right. He didn't check out of the hotel, which might mean he's expecting to go back there. So whatever this plush racket he's got down here may be, it figures to be somewhere close to Carmel."

I glanced at Elsa. Maybe she was following me, but she was certainly keeping

it off her face. Maybe I didn't blame her. I mean, this was a lot of heavy thinking for a stiff like me.

"What I'm getting at is this. We can scout the neighborhood and see what it has to offer."

I must have been talking to myself. The nod she threw my way was plenty vague. She trailed me out to the car and I put her in on her side. When I crawled under the wheel, Elsa said, "Joe, what are we going to do?"

See what I mean—talking to myself!

WE MOOCHED our way up and down the road, stopping at gas stations, hot-dog stands, souvenir shops, any place where there was a chance to talk to people. You don't just bust in and say, "Hey, Mac, where can a guy do a little gambling around here?"

It took time and diplomacy, and the back seat was full of a lot of junk I'd bought to build up good will here and there. Good will I had, but except for a draw-poker game in the back room of a saloon, I was going nowhere.

By four in the afternoon we'd about worked both sides of the road white. Frankly, I was ready to give up. Cheney was on his way to Los Angeles—or Mexico City, as far as I was concerned.

As we rattled along, signs began to pop up beside the road pitching a bar called The Last Chance. That appealed to my poetic nature. "Elsa," I said, "that's where we make our desperation try. If we don't get a lead in there we'll go back to Cheney's hotel and hope he turns up again."

I joggled our crate out of gear as The Last Chance came in sight and we coasted to a stop in front of it.

Any guy who'd steal from Robert W. Service's poetry to name his gin-mill *would* have a stuffed moose head on the wall. Yeah. It was there. Elsa and I went right to the bar, and the moose was the first thing I saw when I cased the room with a fast glance at the mirror. The moose I'd counted on. The guy standing under it, his back to me, was a jolt.

Right then he was industriously feeding quarters into a one-armed bandit. He had nice rhythm in his downswing. Elsa would know about that.

The bartender caught my attention, rasping, "What'll it be, folks?"

Elsa was staring moodily at her clenched hands. She gasped when I whispered, "Come on, honey, we're blowing."

When I had her outside I looked back through the stamp-size window in the swinging door. Mr. "X," the guy who had slugged Elsa in the mouth and helped himself to my five C's, was still punishing that machine. I was pretty sure he hadn't seen us come in or leave.

I hurried Elsa to our car before I told her what it was all about. "It's no fat coincidence Junior turns up down here," I said. "He told you he was looking for Vince, too. I think we could do worse than stay on his tail until we find out where he's going."

I made this sound like a hot idea, but I wasn't kidding myself. It was the last prayer we had. And it was probably my dough going into that gimmick-happy bandit.

I backed the car around so we could watch the entrance of The Last Chance without looking like we were up to any more than a little innocent necking.

It was dark before Junior either broke the machine or got tired of giving it two-bit transfusions. He came out of the bar fast, as though he'd suddenly remembered some place he had to be. We saw him crawl into a '41 coupe, cramp the wheels and make a U-turn out into the highway. I waited until he was past, then took out after him.

Unlike Cheney, he didn't have a car that could get away from us. My big headache was staying far enough behind so he wouldn't tumble to our being there.

He tooled along for about ten minutes, then turned at a narrow, dirt-top side road that bulled its way drunkenly through the big trees. I stopped as soon as we were off the highway, and cut the lights.

"I hope your insurance is paid, honey," I told Elsa, "because we're going the rest of the way blind."

My night vision is usually pretty good, but down there in those trees it took some real circus driving to keep us on the road. Every now and then we'd see Junior's lights ahead of us, making like a lightning bug in the woods.

The breaks were all on our side. We came to a strip of road that was fairly straight. We could see the other car; and just like that, his lights went out. I braked to a fast stop beside the road.

One of those big California moons was riding over a ridge of hills, making lace-work out of the trees. I rolled up my window, reached in front of Elsa and flipped the catch on the door beside her.

"You'd better stay here," I told her, "and don't unlock the doors unless you're sure I'm the guy who wants in."

I got out and tested the door. It was locked, and I waved so-long to the kid.

Before I got up to Junior's car, I saw him striking off on foot across a moon-drenched clearing in the trees. From the course he'd set for himself, he was headed for some lights about a quarter-mile off the road. Maybe he didn't have to worry, but I knew I didn't want to make that good a target.

So I crawled through a barbed-wire fence ahead of the clearing. It was heavy going. Redwoods kept getting in my way, thorn bushes clawed at my hands and face, and I fell once right on my puss.

I was stumbling to my feet when somebody jabbed me in the ribs with what had to be the muzzle of a .45, whispered, "Take it easy, pal."

I wheeled. Junior had me covered.

I knew what to expect. It figured. My boy had left his car out on the road, which meant he wasn't there on a pass. He wouldn't shoot and rouse the people in the house. He would try to score a ten-strike on my skull.

I was ready when he made his move. I rolled my head just enough to make him miss, kicked at his shins in the same movement. One of us had to hit, and this was Feeny's round. I heard him gasp. Before he could raise his gun again, I had his arm twisted behind his back.

"Drop that heater," I told him, "or I'll break your arm off at the elbow."

He let go of it.

CHAPTER THREE

Feeny's Boy

THERE were a lot of clever moves I could have made, but my Irish double-crossed me. More than anything else,

even more than my five C's, I wanted to work this joker over. I did. I spun him around, drove my fist at his mouth. In the dark under those trees he was only a vague shadow until my knuckles barked against his teeth. Then he was very solid indeed. I was on top of him, throwing everything I had.

We were too busy to realize how much racket we were making, crashing around in the underbrush. I never gave it a thought until, all at once, we weren't just a couple of swearing, grunting spooks any more. Someone had us in the beam of a flashlight. I froze, poised at the top of a swing.

"All right, you guys," a voice boomed. "Knock it off."

I was blinded by the light, but I could tell there was a gun behind that voice. And I knew the voice. Cheney.

I watched Junior stumble to his feet, his face lumpy and raw, blood coming from his lips. Cheney said, "Get your hands up." We did.

He frisked us, then marched us through the trees to the house.

It was a large room, authentic Spanish: heavy, rough beams supporting the roof; bare plaster walls; red velvet drapes over the windows; a huge fireplace blackened with soot. The floor was wide, dark planking with scattered Indian rugs. The room was lighted by an iron chandelier. And there were about a dozen slot machines along the walls, several covered roulette and crap tables.

I blinked my eyes in the light, nodded, "Hello, Cheney."

He hadn't made any show of recognizing his old friend from New Jersey. Since the old friend claimed Vince owed him five grand, I could understand that. For some reason I was the big attraction.

"What the hell do you think you're doing up here, Feeny?" Cheney barked.

I nodded at Junior. "I saw this punk down the road a piece," I replied. "I had a small score that I wanted to settle with him."

Cheney glanced at the man's beat-up face. "You're a good man with your fists, aren't you, Feeny?" He'd stopped in front of me, measuring the distance to my chin. He was balanced on the balls of his toes, his hands at his sides.

"Go ahead," I said. "You're a brave guy. Swing."

I didn't have to ask twice. He clipped me beside the jaw with the butt of his rod, not hard enough for a knockout, but the room bounced. I tasted blood.

We were having so much fun we didn't hear the car drive up and the front door open.

Cheney was facing that way. I saw his expression fade and he stopped pasting me. I turned my head as much as I could and focused my good eye on the new arrivals. The Zampinis, Louis and Nora. On either side of them were Louis' two bodyguards. Our side was covered.

Cheney dropped his gun.

Louis crossed the room to a thick plank door, opened it and looked inside. Nora was ignoring me in a large way.

Zampini tossed his head at me and Junior. "Get in here. I want to talk to Cheney."

THE MINUTE we were alone in the other room, the door locked, I grabbed Junior by the front of his shirt and bounced him off the wall. He didn't hand me any argument when I took his wallet out of his coat. He was a hundred short, but it beat nothing.

I tossed him in the corner, and he folded up like a bundle of laundry.

I knew what it was to be caged. This was a small office, with one window barred by a wrought-iron grille. I sat on the edge of the desk, tried to think. Nothing came. Then the rumble of voices in the next room made me forget my troubles. I went to the door, dragged an ear.

"Yeah, a hell of a cute guy," Zampini was saying, without sounding as though he meant it. "You short-change me for fifty G's, but that isn't enough. You have to press your luck. You come down here with my dough and try to muscle in on my setup. I suppose, if I don't put a stop to you now, you'll be moving me out altogether."

No comment from Cheney. I could hear Zampini moving in the other room. "The fifty grand," he went on, "was a loss I could take. I didn't love you for it, but it wasn't breaking me, either. This new promotion is another matter. If I let you open this joint up for gambling, I'm in

trouble. I can't let people get in the habit of seeing Zampini pushed around—not by a cheap punk like you. They'd all be at my throat."

I didn't need a gypsy to tell me what was coming next. I had to crash out of there. As much as I hated Cheney, I couldn't let Zampini rub him out. Elsa still wanted him.

I leaned against the door of my trap. There had to be an out for me—for Elsa.

Something round and hard pressed into my back. Like a gun. I felt it with my hand. The hinge bolt.

Yeah. It was just crazy enough to work, and I was just crazy-desperate enough to try it.

But first I had to put Junior on ice. If my big inspiration was going to pay off at all, I had to know he wasn't going to mess it up. I crossed the room and yanked him to his feet. He looked scared, tried to cover his face with one arm.

"I'm not going to hurt you, stupid," I said. "Here."

I unbuckled his belt, lashed his hands behind his back, dragged him over to the bedstead and tied him to it with the loose end of the belt. Then I was back at the door, clawing at those hinge bolts. The bolts were well greased, came out without a whisper.

In the living room, Zampini rasped, "All right, let's go." The front door closed, then silence.

I pulled the final bolt, eased the door off the hinges.

The room was empty. I crouched and ran to the front door, listened. Zampini, on the porch: "Get in the car, Vince."

This was it—Feeny's big play.

I threw the door open, lunged out, jamming the hinge bolt I'd brought with me into Louis' spine. "Don't move, Zampini. Don't anybody move."

Louis dropped his cigar and it rolled across the porch. "I came here for Cheney," I said. "I'm taking him. I'm taking you, too, Zampini—for insurance. One bad move from anybody and you're a dead duck. Think you can sell it to the boys?"

Louis's head bobbed carefully.

"Tell 'em. Tell 'em so there won't be any mistakes."

The back of his neck was wet. "Play

ball with this guy," he ordered. His voice was cool, tight. He had plenty of guts, but he was no fool. The "gun" in his kidneys had him convinced.

I had him tell his boys to throw their rods out into the brush.

Then we piled in Zampini's limousine, Cheney driving, me in the back seat covering both of them. "Sorry you can't come along, honey," I called to Nora as we started down the hill.

I made Cheney drive to where I'd left Elsa. We ditched the big wagon and the four of us jammed into my rented hack, headed for the main road.

Cheney didn't let up on the accelerator until we passed the turn-off to Carmel. I told him to keep barreling. We still could be in a lot of trouble, as soon as those hoods found their artillery.

Cheney tried to thank me for saving his neck. "Skip it," I told him. "I'm doing this for Elsa."

There wasn't much more talk. I kept alert for anything like a car trailing us. But once we got clear of the Carmel-Monterey traffic, we had the West Coast to ourselves. At least no one challenged what we did with our share of it.

Just outside Santa Cruz, I told Cheney to stop. We sat there on the shoulder, let a couple cars rocket past, shaking our bus.

"All right, Zampini," I said. "This is where we lose you. When you cool off, remember I could've pulled the trigger."

He got out without a word. I handed him the hinge bolt I'd taken him with. "Here's a souvenir for you, Louis."

We left him standing beside the highway.

When we came to the Salinas turn-off, I told Cheney to head for the valley. "We want room to maneuver if we get a chase."

IT WAS something like three-thirty in the morning before the lights of Salinas spilled over both sides of the highway ahead.

There hadn't been a sound from the front seat. The Cheneyes were cardboard cut-outs silhouetted against the windshield. I wasn't surprised.

At the edge of town, I told Cheney to pull up at an auto court which advertised a vacancy. I took him with me when I

punched the manager's night bell. A tired blonde answered it. "Yeah?" she said.

"Got a cabin?"

"Yeah," again. She ducked inside, then padded out in a man's bedroom slippers, a robe with a baggy seat. She opened a cabin. It smelled of paint and disinfectant and dust. But it would do, I told her.

We returned to the office and Vince signed the register, put five dollars in the lady's outstretched claw.

Right there, Joe Feeny made a fathead move. It shows what happens when a no-talent schmo starts getting away with murder. I thought I had the situation under control, took my eye off Brother Cheney. He was at the desk doing the business with the register when I glanced out the window to see if Elsa was all right.

I never knew. There was a flash of movement from Cheney and as I turned from the window I saw his hand come out of the old girl's till with an ancient, frontier-model revolver that looked only as big as a coastal defense gun. The old bag cowered back in a corner of the room. I did a little cowering myself.

Cheney was on top of the situation again, and he loved it. He bared his teeth, moving in on me.

"Where do you want it, wise guy?" he said between his teeth.

My hands were wet, greasy, against the wall. I couldn't breathe. Every muscle in my body was set for the impact of the lead Cheney was going to start throwing any second now.

I was so wrapped up in Feeny's troubles, I didn't see her do it; but a potted plant came sailing at Cheney's head. My washed-out blonde desk clerk was slightly off her target—which was too bad. The pot struck Cheney between the shoulders. He staggered, caught himself, then whirled, firing. And then another shot, almost at the same time.

The tired blonde got much tireder; the front of her robe became a red smear as she slumped to the floor. I was going down with her; Cheney's second shot had been snapped in my direction. I was too numb to know where I was hit or how bad, but I was hit. The kick of the bullet had driven me hard against the wall.

Cheney ran to the door, was opening it as I hit the floor.

I kept trying to breathe, to think. Elsa. She was in the car. He'd use it for a getaway. But I knew he wasn't about to take her along.

He'd kill her. He'd have to kill her, to cover up.

I crawled on my hands and knees to the door, then tried to climb to my feet. That's where I was, propped against the door jamb, when I heard it. There were two fast shots from outside.

Too late. I'd been too late.

I waited for the sound of the starter, the engine roar as gravel beat against the fenders.

There wasn't any of that. Just silence. A truck barreling by, along the dark highway.

I pushed the screen door open and stumbled outside.

The car hadn't moved. I saw Elsa in the pale green light from the neon sign. She looked dead, but that was only a trick of the light. She was calling my name.

I made it to the side of the car.

"Joe! You're hurt!"

She had a sure thing. My left arm was



Elsa

dangling at my side, my hand dripping blood from the ends of my fingers.

"You all right?" I asked.

She nodded.

"I heard shots," I said.

Elsa didn't answer me right away. She reached across the steering-post of the car and switched on the headlights.

(Continued on page 128)

MURDER MELODY

A harp case was just the place for Foley to go, Nick decided. Because, starting now, Violinist Foley would be playing a harp.

IT STARTED out as an argument between sensitive musicians. I was plenty sore that night.

"So I'm all washed up—a has-been!" I told Frascatti. It wasn't easy to accept a demotion, especially after I'd been laid up

By SOL FRANKLIN

"Hey, you!" Brant yelled. "Get away from there! We don't need no female Sherlock Holmes here!"



in the hospital for pretty close to a year.

My fingers toyed nervously with my empty rosin box. Without looking to see, I knew that the other members of our symphony orchestra were taking it all in. It didn't matter. This might just as well be thrashed out in the open.

Sitting opposite me at his desk, Arturo Frascatti, our greying conductor, frowned, but didn't meet my eyes. He appeared to be searching for words, for a way out.

"You're all wrong about this, Nick," he said at last. "I'm not letting you down. But that car smashup didn't do you any good. It's been over a year since you've appeared in a concert. The audience tonight will be very critical. You might crack under the pressure."

"But my hands have healed up fine and I've put in plenty of practicing since I left the hospital," I protested. "As to stage fright, forget about it. I won't even know there's an audience."

Frascatti's frown deepened. "The concertmaster's job is second only to the conductor's. If he falters or misses a cue, he throws the other violins off. You know what happens to the orchestra then."

"But at the hospital you promised me—"

He cut me short. "Yes, I know. I promised you your old job. You'll get it—when you're ready for it. But right now when we're working our way out of the red we can't chance any adverse comments from the critics."

I hesitated, glanced around the backstage rehearsal room we were in. We had just finished the afternoon's rehearsal. The musicians, who had lingered to watch the showdown, didn't seem disappointed. They were standing around with wide eyes and open mouths.

Dorothy Ripple, the second-chair violinist, looked at me with an expression that seemed to say I had already gone too far. Jeff Foley, the new concertmaster and cause of my squabble with Frascatti, eyed me with unmasked contempt. He appeared to be daring me to carry the issue further. Well, I'd show him.

I turned back to Frascatti. "But, Mr. Frascatti, even if the third chair is only temporary, think what it will do to my prestige! Can't you picture the headlines in the critics' reviews? 'Nicholas Gordon,

once-great virtuoso, fails to win back concertmaster's chair from ex-swing player!'"

FRASCATTI'S dark eyes flashed with anger now. "I'm afraid you underestimate Foley," he said coldly. "What if he did play with swing bands? Doesn't classical training count for anything? I'm telling you for the last time, Nick. Don't press the issue now—that is, unless you don't care to play in this orchestra at all." He shrugged his shoulders significantly.

So that was how he felt about it. I stood up. My sweating fingers automatically shoved the rosin box I had been playing with into the lapel pocket of my coat. I leaned over Frascatti's desk.

"Yeah," I said bitterly. "It's a beautiful setup, all right. Third chair for the celebrated violinist, Nick Gordon! You'd put me in the second fiddles if you dared. But let me tell you something. I'm not taking this lying down. A four-flushing jazz hound like Foley never saw the day that he could hold down my chair!"

Frascatti didn't reply as I suddenly turned my back on him and stooped to pick my violin case off the floor. Before I could move away, Jeff Foley approached, a smirk on his greasy-looking face.

"What's the matter, Gordon," he said, "can't you take it? Or did that car collision damage your brains, too?"

I saw red then. The room seemed to waver before me. I put my instrument back on the floor and grabbed the pint-size, ex-swing player roughly by both shoulders. I shook him. He swayed like a sapling in a stiff wind.

"Keep on getting under my skin!" I bellowed. "Just keep it up. When I get done with you, you won't be in shape to hold down the last seat in the second fiddles!"

Maxwell Richards, the orchestra's general manager, pulled us apart. "On your way, Foley," he said. "I've told you before. Let Gordon alone."

Foley shrugged, picked up his instrument and headed for the door. Richards turned to me, stared intently through his thick-lensed glasses. He reminded me of those myopic psychiatrists you see in newspaper cartoons.

"Take it easy, Nick," he said. "Don't

lose your grip on yourself. Disregard Foley and he'll stop rubbing it in."

I didn't answer. I wanted to get out of the place as fast as I could. I grabbed my case and, wheeling around too quickly, almost bumped into a big harp case. I righted myself and made a beeline for the door.

Dorothy Ripple stopped me before I could get out. "Nick, I've got to talk to you," she said. Her voice was low. The others couldn't have heard her.

Dorothy was pretty in any sense of the word. Keen blue eyes, soft blonde hair, a smooth complexion—but my mind wasn't on feminine pulchritude at the moment.

"I'm in no mood for more conversation," I snapped. "Some other time." My hand and turned the doorknob.

Dorothy hesitated, then, "Nick, come in a little earlier tonight, will you? About seven. I'll explain then."

I mumbled something about trying to make it and stalked out of the doorway.

Outside, the cool air felt good. Standing on the top step of the auditorium, I tried to shake the fog out of my brain, to thing things out dispassionately. But the more I thought about it, the angrier I got.

Things had certainly fallen to a new low when a conductor could serve me with an ultimatum, and when a former swing fiddler could sneer in my face. And where did Maxwell Richards get the idea that I needed his paternal advice?

Sure, Richards could afford to talk the way he did. His place in the musical firmament was secure. His rise to prominence had been almost phenomenal. He was first heard of when he had put across Freddie May and his orchestra, currently appearing at a local night club, as the top swing band in the country. Then, quitting May, he'd promoted himself into the general manager's job with our symphony. The symphony had been in the red for some time, but in six months Richards had changed all that. His astuteness in financial and related matters was now giving our orchestra its most profitable season in years.

Richard's talents had not gone unnoticed. From the many offers that had come pouring in to him, he had accepted the juiciest plum of them all—the general managership of the finest grand opera

company in the country, starting next season. Yes, he could afford to talk smart. He was on the way to the top. And I...

I ROUSED myself from my angry thoughts, started to descend the steps of the auditorium and bumped squarely into another man.

"What's the hurry, Nick?"

It was Mel Davis, music critic for the *Morning Journal*. "Oh, how're you, Mel? Didn't see you." We shook hands warmly.

"Er—what's this I hear about Foley keeping the concertmaster's job yet?" Davis asked.

"Looks like he's got it for keeps, Mel. Frascatti seems to think that that accident just about finished me up. I'm thinking of quitting."

Davis whistled. "It isn't for me to tell you your business, Nick. But I wouldn't quit if I were in your place. Foley's an excellent musician, but he's no Nick Gordon. Once you get going again, you're sure to get back first chair."

I shook my head. "I wouldn't mind taking a back seat temporarily if he wasn't so arrogant. But the way he parades himself like a peacock—"

"Arrogance isn't Foley's only vice," Davis said. "The way he's been—" He stopped short. His face was suddenly expressionless.

"Out with it, Mel. What else is wrong with the guy?"

"Nothing, Nick, nothing. Forget it. Got to see Frascatti about the concert." Davis bid me an abrupt good-bye and hastened into the auditorium.

Davis' innuendo about Foley was still on my mind when I got back to the rehearsal room at six forty-five that night. I wasn't prepared for the sight that greeted me when I stepped inside the door.

The place looked as if a hurricane had swept it. Chairs were overturned. Music stands were spilled about. Parts of a smashed violin were strewn around, with an empty violin case lying among the wreckage.

But the thing that rooted me to the spot, caused my eyes to open wide, was the body on the floor. Jeff Foley was lying there with his eyes turned vacantly upon the ceiling. There was blood on his forehead.

I came close to the body. Foley had been slugged first, then strangled with a steel violin string. He lay there as if still gasping for air, his mouth open and his tongue protruding. My legs felt as though they were turning to water. Nausea gripped me.

I don't know how long I stood there, motionless. The blood was pounding furiously through my head. Only too plainly, I recognized the setup. A short time ago, I had openly threatened Foley. Now he was dead, strangled with a violin string. The police would put two and two together, and the sum would add up to Nick Gordon, killer!

Trying to shake the red mist from my brain, I studied more of the harrowing details. I saw that the E string was missing from the broken violin. I didn't have to be a super sleuth to know that it was the one that was now around the dead man's throat.

I stooped low over the body. The white powder on Foley's full dress suit drew my attention. There was more of it on the floor. I rubbed my fingers into some of it, smelled it. A faint, familiar odor assailed my nostrils. I knew what it was then. Rosin. Powered violin rosin.

I straightened up, my knees shaky. Cold sweat lathered my forehead. For I was the only one in the orchestra who was addicted to the use of this finer and more expensive form of rosin.

I knew I had to get hold of myself. Dorothy would come in any minute now. My eyes searched the corners of the large room. Somehow or other, I had to get rid of the body, at least temporarily, until I could think things out more clearly.

The big harp case near Frascatti's desk attracted my attention. The harp was standing in another part of the room and would not be placed back in the case until the next morning when the orchestra was scheduled to leave town. It was an idea.

I half dragged, half carried the corpse over to the case. Rigor mortis hadn't set in yet. Swinging the door of the case open, I placed the body in the case in a sitting position, the knees doubled up under the chin. Then I gathered up the broken pieces of Foley's violin, put them into his empty case and put the violin case in with the body. Using my handkerchief, I

thought I did a fairly good job of wiping the rosin from Foley's clothes.

I closed the harp case, but I had no way of locking it. I hurried back to the spot where I had found the body and wiped the rosin up from the floor. Pocketing my handkerchief, I straightened out the upset chairs and music stands.

I sank down on a chair, then jerked upright as I remembered that I must have left fingerprints on everything I'd handled. But it was too late to do anything about it now. Footsteps were sounding outside the door.

STRAIGHTENING out in my chair, I tried to appear casual as Dorothy came in. She gave me a friendly hello, put her instrument down and seated herself next to me.

"Nick, I've been wanting to tell you." The mellowness of her voice helped to calm me down somewhat.

"Yes, Dorothy," I said, my words coming out steadier than I had expected. "What's it all about?"

"I feel terrible about it, Nick. You don't belong in the third chair. I can't help you about Foley, but I'm sure if I mentioned it to Mr. Frascatti, he'd let you have my place. I don't mind exchanging with you. After all—"

"Thanks, Dorothy," I said, "But I wouldn't deprive you of your place for anything. Besides, I don't expect to be here much longer."

"Nick! You're quitting! Why not wait—"

"No, not that. Something else." I was thinking that you can't play the violin while sitting in the electric chair.

More footsteps sounded outside. The musicians were beginning to straggle in. We stopped talking. I drew my instrument from my case, began to tune up. Now I remembered that I had used up my last bit of rosin at the afternoon's rehearsal. I borrowed a lump from Dorothy, ran my bow over it a few times and returned it to her.

The harpist came in and had a couple of men help him carry the harp out to the stage. When eight o'clock came, and it was time to take our positions on the stage, Frascatti discovered Foley's absence.

"Where's Foley?" he said to no one in particular, but his eyes were on me. I pre-

tended to be making an inspection of my violin.

"He's never been late before," Frascatti went on. "Wonder what's holding him? Anyone see him?"

There was a general shaking of heads. "Queer," Frascatti muttered. "Very queer." He stared at me intently again. Then he looked at Dorothy.

"Miss Ripple," he said. "Take over the first chair tonight." He looked back at me. "Nick, take the second chair."

Dorothy started to protest. "Mr. Frascatti, don't you think Nick ought to—"

Frascatti cut her short. "Take the first chair, Miss Ripple!"

I got through the concert without my playing suffering. The irony of the situation struck me. Frascatti had thought a critical audience might upset me, and yet I had played flawlessly with a murder rap hanging over me.

Back in the rehearsal room, my thinking processes suddenly jammed to a full stop. Ahead of me in the room were about a half-dozen members of the orchestra. They stood there like so many statues, their faces studies in absolute horror.

The harp case was open. Its grisly contents had been spilled out in a grotesque heap upon the floor.

As the rest of the orchestra filed into the room, there was gasp after gasp. I approached the body at close range. I blinked. What was wrong with my eyes, anyway? Hadn't I wiped the rosin from Foley's clothes? My brain couldn't fathom it for a second.

The answer wasn't long in coming. The killer had discovered where the body was hidden and poured more rosin over it.

The eyes of the stricken onlookers turned from the corpse to me. There was no friendliness left in them now. In their minds there was no doubt about who had put Foley away.

The silence in the room grew unbearably heavy. I tried to think, to remember who had come off the stage ahead of me. First, of course, had been Frascatti. Then Dorothy . . .

I looked at Dorothy now. Beneath her smooth makeup her face was deathly pale. I saw the awful question in her eyes as she returned my stare.

Frascatti broke the silence. "Somebody

call the police. Everybody else stay put."

IT WASN'T long afterward that the place was full of officials: fingerprint and pic men, the medical examiner, a crime reporter, and a heavy-set, red-faced man who seemed to be in charge, Sergeant Brant.

As Brant hovered over the body, he pointed to the dead man's clothes. "What's that white stuff?" he growled.

Frascatti came over to him, spoke in low tones. They spoke for several minutes. Then Frascatti led Brant right up to me. I knew what was coming.

"Sorry it came to this, Nick," Frascatti said.

"Save your sympathy," I said. He hadn't wasted any time in putting the finger of guilt on me.

Brant looked me over from head to foot. "So you're the guy who croaked him," he said. "Got anything to say for yourself?"

Something clicked in my mind. I had read about Brant. Bull Brant, the reporters called him, because of his rough tactics. It wasn't likely that he'd believe my story. I hesitated.

"Come on, Gordon, spill it," Brant thrust his head a trifle forward on his broad shoulders. "What did you do after you left here this afternoon? Or should I tell it for you?"

I shrugged, began to explain. "I went home, ate, changed into dress clothes. I sat around a while. I came here about six forty-five to"—I glanced at Dorothy, but she seemed to be taking a gruesome interest in the corpse—"to change a string in my violin." There was no sense in involving Dorothy, at least for the time being.

The medical examiner walked up to us. "Death occurred approximately between six-fifteen and six forty-five," he told Brant, then went back to the body.

"Go ahead, Gordon," Brant said, but I could see plainly it was a formality with him now. The smug look on his red face told me that he didn't believe me.

"I saw the body," I continued. "I knew the murder would be put at my door. So I stuffed it into the harp case with the broken pieces of Foley's violin which were lying all over the place. There was rosin on the body and floor. I wiped it up. The

room was all messed up, as if a struggle had taken place. So I straightened it out. When I came back here at the end of the concert, the body was out of the case. With more rosin on it."

"What'ya wipe the rosin up with?" Brant demanded.

I gave him my handkerchief. He looked at it closely, then, "Let's see the kind of rosin you use."

I knew my answer sounded weak, incriminating. "I—I haven't any right now. I used the last of it at today's rehearsal."

Brant sneered his disbelief and pointed an accusing forefinger at me. "Sure. You used it up, all right. It's laying there all over the corpse. Well, your goose is a golden brown, Gordon."

"But it's a frameup!"

Bull Brant leered at me. "Frameup, my eye! The M. E. says death took place between six-fifteen and six forty-five. You admit being here at six forty-five. Just a case of professional jealousy, I'd say. You had it in for the guy. So you trapped him into coming here. You slugged him, smashed his fiddle and wrapped a string around his neck."

"But—"

"You're the only one here who uses powdered rosin. Had the habit of keeping it in your lapel pocket. In the scrap you accidentally spilled some. You didn't have time to wipe it off his clothes. So you shoved everything into the harp case, and—"

"And then I suppose I reopened the case and threw the body out again. Just to pin the murder on myself!"

Brant grinned complacently. "That's easy. Rigor mortis set in. The stiffening body fell against the door of the case, opening it up. Then the stiff flopped out. Yeah, it's an open-and-shut case, all right."

I looked around the room. Frascatti eyed me coldly. Maxwell Richards blinked at me through his thick lens like an owl. Their expressions said I had already been tried and convicted.

"Hey, you! Lady! Get away from there!" Brant was motioning Dorothy away from the corpse, where she seemed to be getting in the way of the detectives. "Don't need no female Sherlock Holmes here!"

Brant's brusqueness must have startled Dorothy, for she dropped her handkerchief, stooped to pick it off the floor, fumbled it and finally picked it up. She retreated a few steps from the body.

I stared at her suspiciously. Why was she messing around the body? Why didn't she tell Brant of my seven o'clock appointment with her? Why—but I had to shrug off the suspicion. Dorothy was a nice kid. Murder was not in her line—even if she had become concertmaster because of one.

Brant was talking again. "Everybody out of this room except officials." To Frascatti he said, "Show me to your office. Got to notify the coroner." And to me, "Come along, Gordon."

LOOKING very depressed now, Frascatti led the way out of the rehearsal room, through the large concert hall and into the corridor which circled the building like a running track. In the corridor, the entrance to the auditorium loomed up before us. We turned to the left of the entrance, walked past the public telephone booths, then past the cloakrooms. Frascatti's private office was a short distance beyond the last cloakroom.

In the office Brant sat down at the desk, picked up the phone and called the coroner's office.

Dorothy burst into the room, her keen blue eyes shining with excitement. "Nick! The rosin—" I didn't listen. My mind was struggling with the problem of trying to break through the shell of circumstantial evidence that encased me.

Jeff Foley had been an unlikable character. He must have had enemies. But who hated him enough to kill him? Who stood to gain by his death? I hadn't followed up his career as a swing player and consequently didn't know too much about him. In fact, all I knew was that he had never stayed long with any one band. But if I could find someone . . .

Mel Davis! The music critic had made some veiled remark about Foley. I looked down at Brant who was still barking into the phone. If I could contact Davis . . . No, Brant would never consent to it. As far as he was concerned, the case was all tied up in pink ribbons. Nick Gordon, killer!

"Nick! The rosin—" Dorothy was try-

ing to say something again. She tugged at the sleeve of my coat. I didn't have time to listen, for I had just made a snap decision.

I had the door open and was out in the corridor before Brant realized what was happening. He hollered at the top of his lungs. I pounded down the winding corridor in the direction from which we had come. I was safely behind the closed door of one of the cloakrooms by the time Brant's heavy footsteps echoed past.

I waited. There was more running and more shouting. Brant's bellowing had aroused some of the other men from Homicide. Their footsteps took the same course as his.

Still more running feet, this time lighter treads. I opened the door a crack, peered out cautiously. Dorothy was taking off in the direction of the others.

I waited a few seconds more. There was no more running. Frascatti was apparently staying behind in his office. The coast seemed clear now. By now Brant and the others should be outside the building, running in circles looking for me.

I left the cloakroom and softfooted it down the corridor to one of the public telephone booths. I put a nickel in the slot and called the number of Mel Davis' private office at the *Morning Journal*. I didn't have to wait long. Davis' voice sounded at the other end of the wire.

"Look, Mel," I said, "this is Nick Gordon. It's about Foley. What were you saying this afternoon . . ."

"Sorry, Nick," his voice came back. "There're things a man in my position can't repeat. Got to stay on the good side of all musicians, you know. So if you'll excuse me, I've got to work on my morning column now."

"But it may mean my life, Mel! Foley's dead! Murdered!"

"What!" Davis' gasp came back loud. "That's different. Sure, I'll spill it. Foley's been losing a lot of dough lately at one of the big gambling joints in town."

"Are you sure, Mel?" I grasped eagerly for the life preserver that was being thrown at me.

"Yes, Nick. Got it straight from one of the boys in the city room. Losing more than he could possibly afford."

"Where did he get—"

"That's just it, Nick. Foley wasn't the saving kind. So where did he get the dough? Maybe he wasn't lying, after all."

"Lying about what?"

"Well, he had a couple of drinks too many one night. Shot off his mouth about having his 'hooks in a pal.'"

"Who?"

"Don't know. He's played in a lot of bands. Maybe got a little dirt on some band leader."

Davis' revelation had me slightly dizzy. "Do you know offhand the bands he's been with, Mel?"

"Sure." Davis listed them in consecutive order.

"Thanks a million." I hung up.

Before I could get out of the booth, I heard flying footsteps in the corridor again. They seemed to come from the direction of the entrance to the auditorium.

It was Dorothy. She spotted me at the same time I saw her. When I stepped from the booth, she grabbed my arm.

"Nick, I've been wanting to tell you. About the rosin—"

My mind wasn't on violin rosin. I was thinking about what Davis had just spilled. About blackmail.

"Listen to me, Nick!" Dorothy had opened her handbag and drawn a handkerchief. The handkerchief was rolled into a small ball. Now she opened it up and shoved it close under my eyes. She pointed to a tiny amber crystal on it.

"Don't you see? This crystal came off a piece of lump rosin!"

SOMETHING buzzed in my brain. "Say that again, Dorothy!"

"You understand now, Nick, don't you? I saw something sparkling on the floor, right near the body. Looking close, I saw several crystals like this. So when Brant ordered me away from the body, I pretended to drop my hanky and picked this one up."

My hands shook as I took the handkerchief from Dorothy and studied the shiny rosin crystal. For the first time that day I smiled. Home-made powdered rosin. I remembered experimenting with it when I was a kid violinist.

Carefully I wrapped the handkerchief around the crystal, then put it in my

pocket. Dorothy's discovery, tied in with what Davis had told me, now gave me a fighting chance to figure out the rest of the puzzle. But freedom of action was still imperative.

Any thought I had of leaving the building by the front entrance was dissipated quickly. For Bull Brant now appeared in the bending corridor. He must have gumshoed his way in. I hadn't heard him.

He saw me and let out a roar like a lion. For a split second I stood there in indecision. Then I made up my mind. I turned and ran back in the direction of Frascatti's office. Brant took up the chase again.

Inside the office, I slammed the door. Frascatti was sitting at the desk. He looked up in bewilderment at my entrance.

"Nick, for heaven's sake! What are you up to?"

There was a key in the door. I turned it. A second later Brant threw himself against it. He beat against it with both fists.

"Open up in there! Open up, I tell you!"

I didn't pay any attention. I ran to the other side of the room, unlocked the window. I lifted the lower sash.

"Nick! What are you doing?" Frascatti was on his feet now.

I lifted myself through the open window. It was an easy drop to the ground. None of Brant's men was in sight. I ran down the avenue.

I ran about a block, then was lucky to hail a cab. Giving the driver the address of the Red Mill, a night club, I told him to step on the gas. He grabbed the five-dollar bill I flashed before him and the cab was off with a sudden jerk.

A few minutes later the cabbie braked his car before the night spot. I told him to wait for me and then hurried into the club. When I reentered the cab after a short stay in the club, I knew what I wanted to know.

Inside the corridor of the auditorium Brant was talking to a couple of his men. He looked glum. When he saw me he let out a surprised whoop and grabbed my arm roughly.

"That puts the finisher on you, buddy."

He needn't have dragged me through

the concert hall. I was quite willing to come along peacefully. My entrance caused a mild commotion. The musicians were still hanging around.

Brant led me into the rehearsal room and the others crowded in behind us.

"Never could figure it out," Brant muttered to no one in particular. "These killers just can't stay clear of the scene of their crimes."

"Look, Brant," I said. "You can let go of me now. I had to get away to get certain evidence. I can prove my innocence now."

Brant hesitated, then let his hand drop from my arm. "Don't try any more funny stuff," he warned.

I turned to Maxwell Richards. "I called up Mel Davis a while ago. He told me Foley was supposed to be blackmailing someone. He also told me which bands he'd played with. Freddie May's was the last one. That meant Foley was with Freddie at the same time you were, Richards. Well, I've just come from the night club Freddie's playing at."

Richards turned pale. He blinked at me through his thick lens, waited for me to continue.

"Freddie wouldn't talk at first," I went on. "But when I told him about the murder, he coughed up plenty. You didn't quit Freddie, Richards. He fired you—for dipping into the band's bankroll!"

Richards looked around the room like a trapped animal. He appealed to Brant. "Take him away! He's crazy!"

Brant scratched his head. "Keep talking, Gordon."

"Freddie said you made restitution when he caught you. He didn't want any unfavorable publicity, so he didn't prosecute or stand in your way when you were offered another job. He even swore his band members to secrecy about the theft. Unfortunately for you, however, Foley quit Freddie and joined up with this symphony right after you came here.

"You were headed for the biggest managerial job in music, Richards. The high mogul of grand opera! Foley saw a chance to make some easy money. He threatened to make your past public—unless you came across. You couldn't afford to jeopardize your future, so you paid him off for a while. When I scrapped with

him today, you saw your chance to get rid of him. You inveigled him into coming here early tonight and—well, need I go on?”

Richards' face was a study of utter desperation. But an element of craftiness crept into it now. "Talk's cheap, Gordon. You can't prove I killed Foley."

I drew Dorothy's handkerchief from my pocket, opened it up carefully and laid it flat on the palm of my right hand. I extended my hand toward Richards, held the handkerchief about a foot away from his eyes.

"Ever see that before?" I asked him.

Richards blinked through his thick lens. "Never saw that handkerchief before in my life. It's not mine."

I grinned. "So you bit. All you can see with those near-sighted eyes of yours is the handkerchief. Yes, it was a pretty cute frameup, Richards. You were smart. Ready-made powdered rosin is scarce and will be for some time to come. Much of it has always been imported into this country from Europe. Very few music stores have it. A purchase of it might have been traced back to you. So you made your own powder—from lump rosin!

"It might have worked if Dorothy hadn't spotted some shiny crystals near the body. Like the one that's on this

handkerchief. That put the guilt right on you. You did a pretty good job, but it's difficult to completely pulverize lump rosin without the proper equipment. A few elusive crystals always manage to bury themselves in the powder. But anyone with normal eyesight would have seen them and sifted them out!"

Richards' right hand darted into his coat pocket. But I was in motion by the time he pulled out his .22 automatic. My left hand grabbed his wrist, sent his arm upward just as he pressed the trigger. The bullet plowed harmlessly into the ceiling.

FRASCATTI, Dorothy and I stayed on in the auditorium after Richards had been led away and the others had gone. I slipped my arm around Dorothy's waist. She blushed but didn't try to extricate herself.

"Well, Mr. Frascatti," I said, "do I get back the concertmaster's job?"

The conductor stared at me uncertainly for a minute, then looked at Dorothy with a grin.

"You two seem to make a mighty fine combination," he said. "It would be a shame to break it up. And Nick can probably see those soft blue eyes of yours better if he's sitting in the first chair, eh, Miss Ripple?"

CARRYING THE TORCH

THE LITTLE GUY was in love. He was rather horribly in love. The thing licked at his mind like flames and what he saw in them was not beautiful, except maybe to himself.

He had to be a hero. He had to save her life. Of course, for most would-be romanticists, such daydreams would have been futile, but he had stuff in him. The stuff to make his dreams come true.

So there was a fire. It was one of the best fires ever—because the place where she worked, the place where he must save her, was a hospital. Hundreds of helpless patients, lots of scared nurses—the little guy had more fun! He ran around in the smoke-filled corridors, looking for his girl to save, though, of course, he had never had the nerve to tell her that she was his girl. He would let her in on the great secret after he had saved her.

Actually he, little Ernie Rhodes, was the most important person there, though nobody knew it. Some doctors in operating rooms went on with their work, despite the smoke and the flames. People died. Firemen fought the flames. Nurses, including the girl Ernie was trying to save, stayed at their posts.

Who remembers their names?

Nobody.

Everybody remembers Ernie Rhodes, who tried to burn down a hospital to impress a girl, and who said when he was caught that he was sorry, but couldn't remember why.—*Lauri Wirta*



GENTLEMAN JIM GREEN-leaf exhaled a cloud of purest Havana smoke and thoughtfully regarded the end of his cigar. Two inches of white ash on its end still indicated exactly the original shape of the cigar.

"Still enjoying the best, eh, Gentleman Jim?" we remarked as we checked through our pockets to make sure that our visitor's deft fingers hadn't lifted anything.

"Son, it never pays to settle for anything less than that," Gentleman Jim advised. "It has been my policy through a long and not unrewarded life to be fastidious about everything I ever accept." He took a hitch in his faultlessly creased, fawn-grey trousers, and crossed ankles encased in ten-dollar Shetland wool socks. "Yes," he said reflectively, "never settle for anything less than the best." He sat up abruptly as something occurred to him.

"Do you have the time, son?" he asked. "I have a dinner date with Gertie Fliegel at seven. Gertie is a tempestuous woman, and I should hate to be late."

"Plenty of time yet," we told him. Then, out of curiosity: "How come no watch, Gentleman Jim? Must be a story behind that."

"Never use them," he said. "Not since a certain sad occasion when a timepiece was the cause of my ending up in durance vile. On one of my trips up the river that was."

The old rogue settled back comfortably

in his chair. "It was some years ago this occurred, when Gertie, then known as Hot-Fingers Gertie, and I were still young. Ah, we were a gay pair, we two, and how we loved to do the town! Delmonico's, the opera, the Follies—the best in New York was always ours. And how we loved to give each other presents! Gertie presented me with a fine diamond stickpin, a beauty—it came right off Diamond Jim Brady's chest—and I in turn gave her a satiny set of pearls. Right out of Tiffier's front window—through a hole in the glass, of course. Then Gertie gave me an enormous ruby ring, and I reciprocated with an emerald brooch that would have done credit to that leader of the Four Hundred, Mrs. Van Astringham herself. As a matter of fact, I think it probably had adorned her bosom before it accidentally came into my possession. There were many other gifts, all equally splendid, but too numerous to mention at this time."

He sighed gently. "It was our anniversary party, though, that proved my undoing. Gertie and I were celebrating the anniversary of the second year of our association. And how we did it up! Luchow's for dinner, then the opera, and finally midnight supper at the Plaza. It was there that I gave her my little gift. A platinum bracelet encrusted with the most beautiful emeralds, each one five carats or larger.

"Gertie was not to be outdone. She

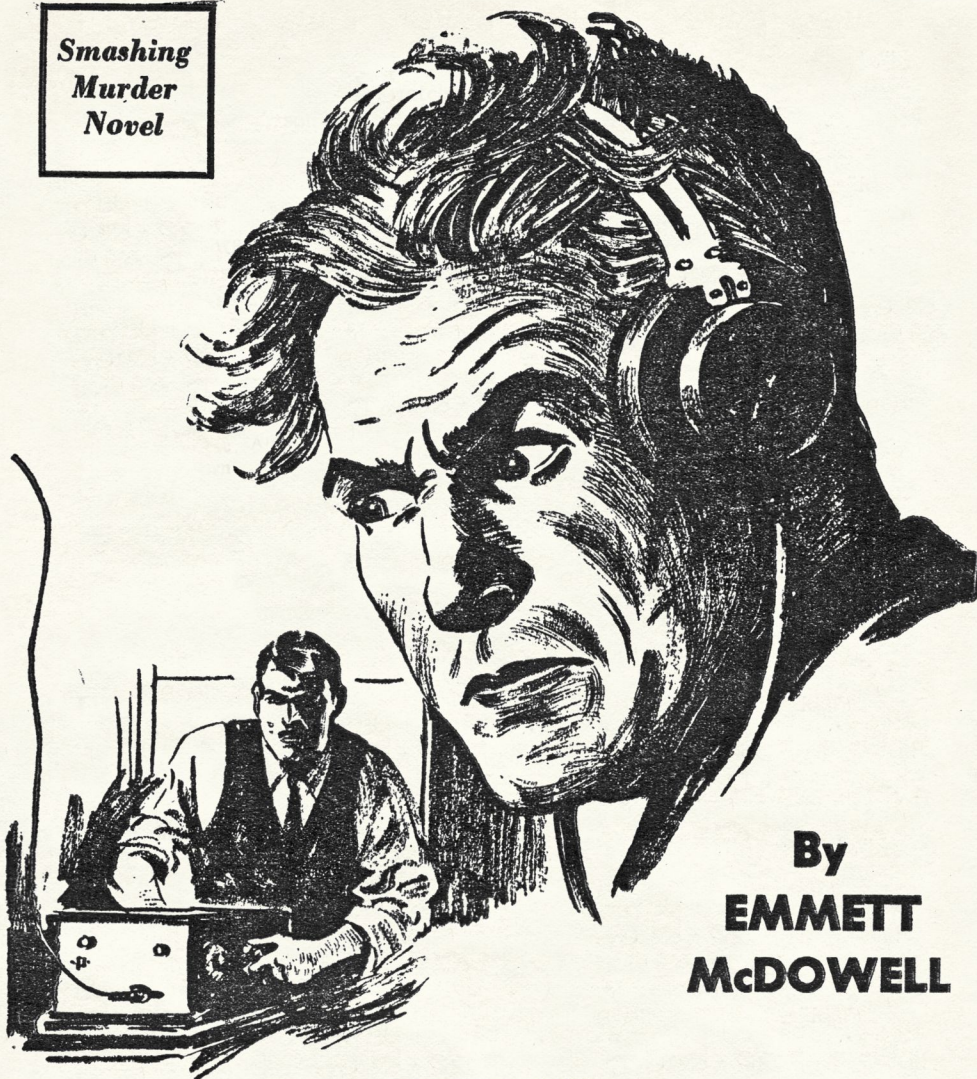
(Continued on page 129)

SOMEBODY KILLED MY GAL!

"Drop it," Beth said. "Don't try anything—or else."



**Smashing
Murder
Novel**



**By
EMMETT
McDOWELL**

CHAPTER ONE

Bargain in Blood

A LITTLE after five o'clock it started to drizzle. The November dusk closed in simultaneously. The street lamps couldn't compete against smog, misting rain and nightfall all at one time; and the business district grew inky.

Just inside the employees' entrance of Stediman's Department Store, Beth

Wood leaned against the sock counter reading the late edition of the *Louisville Times*. The quitting bell had just rung, and Beth was trying to watch the departing clerks from the tops of her eyes as she read. It was quite a feat, though Beth usually could manage it. But not tonight.

Tonight, anyone could have lugged out

A corpse Lieutenant Gordon had—beautiful, long-legged Peg Calloway. Witnesses he had—fifty of them. And now all Gordon needed was a killer who would match fifty different descriptions!

a Steinway baby grand without distracting her attention from the paper. For the murder of Albert Hudnut had been splashed across the front page, and Beth had more than a passing interest in the killing.

She hadn't known Albert Hudnut. But then neither had the police. In fact, it wasn't until after Albert Hudnut had been shot to death in his office that very afternoon that it had been discovered he was a big-time fence. The warehouse of the Hudnut Transfer Lines on Twelfth and Main had turned out to be full of stolen furs, silver, dresses and furniture, all from the best Fourth Street firms.

Beth, who was the store detective, had been called in to identify any merchandise that might have come from Stediman's. She had seen the body, talked with the city detectives. She was still excited, her mind busy with the matter.

She was a thin, taut young woman with a thin, pretty face, pretty despite its hardness. She was wearing a smart black coat, sensible heels and a saucy black hat which she had pushed back in order to read more comfortably.

There was something cat-like in her preoccupation; the resemblance was uncanny. It was something in her attitude, in the carriage of her lithe figure, but principally it was her eyes. They were almost topaz—a startling, tawny, yellow-brown. They were like the eyes of a tigress.

The account in the paper, she saw, was substantially correct. Albert Hudnut had been killed between twelve and one that afternoon. He had been shot in the back of the head as he was kneeling before the open door of the safe. His secretary, returning from lunch, had discovered him and had promptly fainted. There had been only a small hole in the back of Hudnut's skull but the soft-nosed bullet had carried away most of his face.

The secretary didn't know whether anything had been taken from the safe or not. She thought Hudnut kept quite a bit of cash in it, but she wasn't sure. She didn't know anything about the stolen merchandise. She didn't know anything about anything, so help her.

"Liar!" Beth muttered under her breath.

SHE LOWERED the paper, fixed the departing clerks with a cold, suspicious scrutiny. Throughout the first floor, displays were being whisked from sight, lights blinking off. The nimbler salesgirls were already streaming out onto the dark, cold, rain-swept sidewalk. Beth was stationed at the exit in order to see that they didn't take any of Stediman's exclusive merchandise along with them.

Some of the girls said, "Good-night, Miss Wood," uneasily. Beth nodded.

Just then she caught sight of Peg Calloway approaching with a package under her arm. Peg worked in the credit office. She was a striking, blue-eyed girl whose muskrat jacket exactly matched her brown hair.

Beth Wood scrutinized Peg's long legs enviously, then allowed her eyes to travel upward, taking in the modish grey skirt, the large black-leather bag.

Beth's tawny eyes missed nothing. Her vision was phenomenal, and it was a stock joke at Stediman's that Beth Wood could see around corners, out of the back of her head, and through anybody.

"Hi," said Peg with a large, meaningless smile, as she halted in front of the store detective. "Have you seen Dan?"

Beth's lips thinned a trifle. Dan Lever was the floor walker—a nice boy. Not that there was anything wrong with Peg, except that she'd lost her amateur standing in Beth's eyes. For Peg had been married, divorced, and, according to store gossip, was living with her lawyer at the moment. However, Peg and Dan Lever had been seen together quite a bit lately. Maybe Peg had split up with her lawyer.

Beth said, "No. Dan left early, I think."

"Early?" Peg bit her lip. A small, startled frown drew her plucked brows together. Her face beneath the makeup had grown pale. "That's funny," she said and turned uncertainly toward the plate-glass door.

Outside, it looked black and ugly. Headlights glistened on the wet asphalt street and the brimming gutters, and on the small crowd of clerks, wrappers and office girls who were huddled beneath the marquee. The group was growing all the time as more employees pushed through the door.

They let in a lot of cold, damp air, and Beth shivered, pulled her black coat closer. She hated the wet. Out of the corner of her eye she saw Peg stiffen.

"Damn!" the girl muttered, loud enough for Beth to hear. Her blue eyes were round, frightened. The lipstick looked like a smear of red paint across the lower half of her white face. She held out her package to Beth.

"Keep this for me, will you please, Woodie? I'll be back for it in just a minute. Please."

Beth took the package, raising her eyebrows in surprise at the girl's urgency. It was about the size of a shoe box but heavier and wrapped in brown paper.

"I'm going home in twenty minutes."

"That's all right, Woodie. I'll be back for it before then."

Beth shrugged, reached over the sock counter, tucked the box out of sight on a shelf.

"Be seeing you." Peg turned back to the door, pushed out into the cold darkness.

Beth's eyes followed her curiously through the plate glass. For a moment she almost lost her in the press beneath the marquee. Then she saw a man step from the curb to confront the girl.

He wore a shapeless tan trenchcoat, and his face was hidden in the shadow from the brim of his hat. He raised his arm. Inside the store Beth caught the dull gleam of blued metal in his fist. Peg's scream reached her faintly.

The girl flinched backward just as the man fired. The muzzle of the gun couldn't have been a foot from Peg's face. An angry orange flash streaked from the man's fist. The report sounded like a car backfiring.

Peg's head jerked. Her hat fell off. Then she began to buckle as if her bones had all turned to cartilage.

The man shot her twice more. He stood over the girl and pumped the two shots into her with vicious deliberation. Then he whirled and began to run.

The whole thing had taken place so quickly that it was all over before the spectators could quite grasp what was happening. A woman screamed, her voice cutting hysterically across the silence. There was a general stampede away from

Peg's body toward the store doors.

Beth Wood came to herself with a start, dashed outside, yanking a Colt Banker's Special from her purse.

The man was already fifty yards down the near-deserted street. He was sprinting at top speed, his coat flapping like wings.

Beth jerked up her pistol and fired, and knew instinctively that she had missed.

The man half turned, snapped a shot behind him. Beth felt the slug twitch at her hat brim before it ricocheted from the wall of Stediman's to go whining nastily up the street.

She leaped back into the cover of the department store doorway like a chicken springing out of the path of a car. Thoroughly shaken, she stuck her head cautiously around the frame. She was just in time to see him dive into an automobile.

The car started up with a jerk, roared out into the traffic. It was impossible at this distance to tell the make. It was a coach, blue or black, but that was all she could be sure of. Then it whirled around the corner into Third Street and vanished.

Beth was suddenly conscious of the pandemonium about her. Shriill screams, the blast of a policeman's whistle. Everyone had fled back inside Stediman's, leaving Peg Calloway sprawled on the wet pavement like a bedraggled bundle of rags. Beth caught sight of a cop running from Fourth Street toward the scene of the shooting. He was wearing a shining wet black slicker from which he was trying to disentangle his revolver.

The store detective forced herself to approach Peg's body.

There were three holes in the girl's forehead that could have been covered with a silver dollar. Blood was still welling from the wounds, from her nose and mouth. It looked black as New Orleans molasses in the dim light of the marquee.

Beth shivered, an all-gone feeling in the pit of her stomach. Then her eyes narrowed.

Peg's bag was gone.

There was no sign of the big, black-leather pocket book anywhere. The killer must have snatched it. But why?

Beth swallowed hard, looked away

quickly, swallowed again. "Oh, Lord," she thought, "I'm going to be sick!" She just made the curb.

"BY JUDAS!" Lieutenant Gordon said in exasperation, "it's not possible. Here we've got fifty eye-witnesses to a murder, and not one of 'em can give a description of the killer! It's the damndest thing I ever heard of!"

Beth regarded the homicide man soberly. At first glance Lieutenant John Gordon appeared big and fat, with a fat, tough face. But Beth knew that there was no softness about the man anywhere.

Lieutenant Gordon was wearing a grey, covert-cloth topcoat, a grey felt hat and brown Scotch-grain oxfords. His small, shrewd blue eyes roved restlessly about the Men's Shop, where they were sitting in comfortable over-stuffed chairs, a chrome ashtray between them.

The coroner had come and gone, taking Peg's body with him. The photographers and the reporters were no longer in evidence. The fifty witnesses had told their stories and departed. They were all gone, all except Beth and Lieutenant Gordon and the night watchman; and the watchman was just leaving on his rounds of the upper floors. The vast, somber reaches of the sales floor stretched off around them like a museum after closing hours.

Lieutenant Gordon ground out his cigar in the ashtray, regarded the store detective with a bland, unwinking stare. He couldn't make her out, never had been able to. Nice legs, nice figure. Kind of skinny, but nice. He brought his mind back to the murder with an effort.

"Any line on this Calloway girl?"

Beth's yellow eyes were thoughtful. "Ye-es. But I'm not sure it means anything. She's been married, you know, and separated. Her husband was sent to prison for passing bad checks. She divorced him while he was in the pen and took her maiden name back."

"What was the fellow's name?"

"Walker. Jerome Walker."

Lieutenant Gordon bit off the end of another cigar. He said, "Hm. Walker, eh? I remember that case. He cashed bum checks all over town, then skipped. The FBI caught up with him in Indian-

apolis. The girl was with him, but she claimed she didn't know anything about it, and he backed her up. She got off scot free, but he got two to five. Three years ago, that was."

"He's out," Beth said. "Last week. Good behavior."

"How do you know?"

"Peg told me. She was scared of him."

Gordon's round, rough face hardened.

"Guess we'd better pick him up."

Beth continued to sit quietly with her hands in her lap.

"Don't jump to conclusions, John. You haven't heard the rest of it."

He grunted.

Beth said, "Peg was broke after the trial. No job. Nothing. Then she began to run around with her husband's lawyer. Fellow by the name of Richard Jenkins. Know him?"

"*Know* him!" Lieutenant Gordon looked as if he'd bitten into a green persimmon. "Hell yes, I know that damn shyster. He defends every petty crook in town. He's going to go too far one of these days and we'll nab him. Don't tell me *he's* mixed up in this!"

Beth looked shocked at his language. "I—I don't know, of course. But Jenkins did get Peg her divorce. For free."

"For free? That doesn't sound like Jenkins."

"Well," Beth said, "maybe it wasn't altogether free. I believe they still have adjoining rooms at the Beechmont Hotel."

Gordon slammed a meaty fist into his palm. "Judas! Think of Walker rotting in prison, brooding about his ex-wife two-timing him with that shyster lawyer. Figuring maybe that Jenkins sold him down the river in order to get his hands on Walker's wife. I wouldn't blame him if he did shoot her!"

"That's not all," Beth said. "When Peg's final decree did come through she ditched Jenkins, too—after he'd been footing her bills for her. Then she started to chase after a fellow here in the store. Floorwalker. Dan Lever's his name. A swell kid, but young."

"Holy hell," said the lieutenant in amazement. "What a mess. Where did you get all this?"

"Different people. Some of it from Peg herself. I keep my ears open."

"You do that!" Gordon grinned, glanced at his watch. "Gotta be getting back to headquarters. Can I drop you off somewhere?"

"Yes. My apartment. It's around on Third—" She paused, frowning suddenly.

"What's eating you now?" he demanded.

"Nothing. Nothing. I have to powder my nose. I'll be with you in a moment."

THE LIEUTENANT sat back down with a resigned expression, puffed at his cigar. His eyes followed Beth with interest as she went to a counter of socks, reached over it and pulled out a brown-paper parcel about the size of a shoe box. He wondered why a good-looking girl like her hadn't got married. She acted kind of prudish, as if she were half afraid. Some guy must've thrown a hell of a scare into her some time or other, he figured, and chuckled.

Beth tucked the shoe box under her arm and left the floor.

When fifteen minutes had gone by Lieutenant Gordon began to fidget. He was a thick, heavy man—in actuality what seemed to be fat was solid meat—and he was possessed of a driving energy that never allowed him to relax more than a few minutes at a time. He got up and began to stride back and forth. What the devil was keeping her?

After twenty-five minutes he was ready to go up and yank her out of the wash room.

Just then Beth appeared on the floor and hastened toward him. "I'm sorry I kept you waiting, John," she apologized nervously. "I—it's silly, but I felt as if I was going to faint—"

"Hey," he said, peering at her closely, "you look all washed out."

"It's the murder, I guess." There was a film of perspiration on her upper lip.

"Maybe I'd better call a doctor."

"No!" she almost yelled. She added in a calmer voice, "No, John, really. I'll be all right when I get home. I'll take a hot bath and go straight to bed."

Lieutenant Gordon didn't insist. They went outside, climbed into the squad car. There was still a crowd of morbid thrill-seekers hanging around. A little man was

pointing out the dark, oily spots of blood. Gordon sensed Beth's shudder.

All the way home she sat beside him as if on eggs, the brown-paper parcel clutched in her lap.

"New pair of shoes?" he said.

"What? Oh! Yes."

He patted her knee as they drew up before her apartment house, a reconverted red-brick mansion of the nineties. It had stopped raining, but a layer of clouds blotted out the stars. The night was thick as tar.

Beth slid out before he could help her.

"Thanks, John," she said, her lips looking stiff as leather. "I—I'll be seeing you, I suppose."

"Yeah. You bet. Tomorrow. I'll drop around the store and pick you up. Figger you'll be able to give me some leads on this thing."

She kept edging away.

"Say," he said, "you look like a scared cat. Don't let this get you down."

"No," Beth said. "I'll be all right."

Gordon flipped a hand at her, let out the clutch. The powerful police car moved off smoothly.

The twinkle went out of the lieutenant's blue eyes as he drove slowly back to the court house. Beth Woods, he was certain, was scared half out of her wits. But what had frightened her? He wondered if she were holding something out on him. He wouldn't put it past her.

He didn't get out of the car when he pulled up in the reserved parking space behind the courthouse, but sat there chewing savagely at his cigar, listening to the police radio without actually hearing it.

Messy, he thought distastefully. Peg Calloway had been a tramp. Probably deserved killing. But that wouldn't keep some guy from frying for her murder.

He got out his notebook, studied the items he had jotted down from Peg's application record in the personnel file at Stediman's.

"Twenty-seven. No next of kin. Graduated from business school in 1941."

The FBI had gone into her background pretty thoroughly the time they'd picked her up with her husband in Indianapolis. Maybe he could get a lead from them.

The radio said, "Car Seventeen. Car Seventeen. A drunk at Thirteenth and

Market. Investigate and report back."

Two murders in the same day! Gordon wondered if there were any connection. It didn't seem likely. Still, Hudnut's warehouse had been full of stolen merchandise from Stediman's. There might be something there.

The radio came back to life. "Car Twenty-three. Car Twenty-three. A man reported breaking in apartment house at 1212 South Third. Second Floor . . ."

Gordon jerked as if he'd been stung. 1212 South Third! That was the number of Beth Woods' apartment.

He gunned the motor. The police car leaped ahead, made the turn into Sixth Street on two wheels, siren screaming.

CHAPTER TWO

Shot in the Dark

BRAKES squealing, Lieutenant Gordon swung the sedan to the curb before the apartment house at the same time as the prowler car. He sprang out and crossed the pavement, noticing that lights were blazing all over the building. As he ran up the steps into an old-fashioned center hall, two uniformed police galloped after him. Sanders and Talbot, he recognized. Good men.

Sanders shouted, "What is it, Lieutenant?"

He shook his head.

There was a dim light burning in the hall. A man in his shirt sleeves was peering nervously up the stairs.

"Where was it?" Gordon snapped.

"Up there," the man said. "Sounded like a shot."

A woman was standing in an open doorway. "Don't you go up there, George!" she told the man.

Gordon brushed the man aside, took the steps three at a time, revolver in hand. It was a .38 Colt mounted on a .41 frame with a four-inch barrel.

He caught sight of another woman standing in the upper hall, a small, blonde woman in a print dress, with her hair done up in curlers. She uttered a startled squeak, pointed at a closed door.

"There. It was a shot!"

Gordon banged on the panel. "Beth! Beth!"

Talbot said, "Shall we break it in, Lieutenant?"

"Is that you, John?" a frightened voice asked from the other side of the door.

"Yes. Open up!"

He could hear her fumbling at the lock; then the door swung inward. They crowded inside, Gordon, Talbot and Sanders. The three big men seemed suddenly to fill the room to overflowing. It was tiny, anyway—a nine-by-twelve green axminster rug just fit the floor. There was a russet studio couch, two upholstered chairs, a walnut secretary and Beth Wood.

A dampish, tropical-flowered housecoat clung to Beth's skin. A large towel was wrapped turban fashion about her head. She was barefooted and clutching a big, short-barreled revolver in her small fist.

"Kitchen!" she said breathlessly. "I was taking a bath when I heard him!"

Sanders, who had poked his head into the kitchen, said, "There ain't nobody—Oh-oh!"

"What is it?" Gordon snapped, pushing him aside.

It was one of those miniature efficiency kitchenettes, he saw, about the size of a postage stamp with refrigerator, gas stove, sink. A back door opened onto an outside stair. The pane of glass in the door had been criss-crossed with adhesive tape and shattered, but it still clung to its frame. In the left hand corner was a bullet hole.

Gordon tried the door. It was bolted, the key in the lock. He opened it. Sanders flashed a light onto a small landing from which the stairs led down to a concrete court directly on the alley.

The light suddenly steadied on a spot of blood as big as a quarter on the landing.

"Winged him," Gordon muttered. With Sanders lighting the way, he descended the stairs, found two more spots. There was another in the concrete court almost at the gate. The alley was paved with brick, and there the trail of blood stopped.

"Must've had a car," Sanders said.

Gordon nodded, climbed the steps back to Beth's apartment.

She was huddled on the couch, clutching the robe about herself forlornly.

Gordon planted himself solidly in front

of her. "What's it about?" he growled.

She gave him a frightened glance, looked back down at the carpet, shook her head.

"I didn't see him. I shot through the back door. Then I heard him run down the steps and—a car drive away."

The lieutenant continued to regard her wordlessly, without expression. Finally he jerked his head at the uniformed prowling car men.

"I'll take over," he said. "You fellows can go ahead."

They left, drawing the door shut after them.

Beth said, "Thanks, John," in a small voice.

WITHOUT answering, he turned to the bedroom, glanced inside. It was furnished in maple—a vanity, dresser, bed, chair. Beth's clothes were laid out on the chair.

"What are you looking for?" she demanded with a trace of alarm.

"Any more rooms?"

"Just checking up."

His eyes lingered on her momentarily as he turned around to face her. The thin robe showed off her slight, trim figure that looked deceptively fragile but, he suspected, was about as tough as steel cable. He realized suddenly that she was blushing.

"Well," he said, deadpan, "why was a burglar trying to break into your place? What was he after?"

"Why—why—the usual things, I suppose."

He continued to regard her stonily.

"For heaven's sake, John," she said, "don't stare at me that way. What do you think he was after?"

"I don't know."

"Is it so important? The way you act, a body would think I'd been visited by Peg's murderer himself?"

"Was it?"

"Was it what?"

"The killer. The fellow who tried to break into your apartment. Was he the killer?"

Beth said indignantly, "What an idea! Why should he try to burglarize my apartment?"

"That's what I want to know. Why

should he go after you? What are you holding out on me, Beth?"

"But it wasn't the murderer! You're acting just like a policeman. I never heard of such a thing!"

He said, "All right, all right, so it was just a burglar. Or maybe," he added with a malicious grin, "It was a Peeping Tom. You sure as hell haven't anything in this apartment to attract a robber. Yeah. That's probably what it was. A Peeping Tom. Why don't you keep your blinds pulled down?"

"They were down!" Beth snapped, her face red.

Lieutenant Gordon shook his head. "Beth, this business is screwy enough without you concealing evidence. This fellow's killed once—maybe twice. He won't hesitate to kill again."

"Twice?"

"Yeah. I've a hunch the Calloway girl's death is tied up with Hudnut's murder. Have you had dinner?"

"What?"

"Have you eaten yet?"

Beth shook her head, her yellow eyes bewildered. "No. But I don't see how that has any bearing—"

"Good," he said. "Neither have I. What do you say we eat here. I'll have to call in at headquarters."

"You—you mean you want me to fix a meal?"

"Yeah. What's the matter? Can't you cook?"

"Of course I can cook!"

A slow grin spread over Gordon's homely face.

Beth looked as if she didn't know whether to be mad or not. Then she caught his eyes on her figure and blushed.

"My goodness!" she said. "I'll have to get dressed first." She fled into the bedroom, slamming the door behind her.

LIEUTENANT GORDON'S office was small and bare and stank of disinfectant, stale cigar smoke, sweat and damp limestone. The big detective sat at his desk with a scowl on his round, tough face, a dead cigar in his mouth. He was wearing the same suit he'd worn last night. It was wrinkled, and stained with sweat and cigar ash. He hadn't been to bed.

The door opened. A man stuck his head inside and said, "Jenkins is here."

"Send him in."

Richard I. Jenkins, attorney at law, walked in with a grin on his face. His eyes were grey-green, shrewd and cold despite the smile. Though he couldn't have been much over thirty, he was beginning to get plump and bald, and his expensive, tweedy-looking suit couldn't conceal a small paunch.

"Morning, Lieutenant. You wanted to see me?"

"Sit down." Gordon made no move to rise or shake hands.

Jenkins didn't take offense but sank onto a cane-bottomed chair across the desk from the lieutenant.

"You know Peg Calloway was shot yesterday?" Gordon asked without any preliminaries.

"Yes. The papers—"

"You were having an affair with her, weren't you?"

Jenkins ran his hand through his thinning hair, his eyes remote, thoughtful.

"Am I under arrest?"

Gordon glared at him stonily.

"Jenkins," he said in a soft voice, "if you don't want to answer my questions here, I'll take you in the back room and sweat you a little. There's not a judge on the bench that wouldn't shake my hand if I were to break every bone in your body. You've been publicly reprimanded twice. Any more trouble and you'll be disbarred."

Jenkins wet his lips, swallowed. "What I'm doing is a service to people who can't afford a high-priced lawyer," he said, "and you know it. Those people are human beings just the same as anybody else. They've a right to legal counsel and—"

Gordon snorted. "Save it for the jury."

But Jenkins wasn't to be stopped.

"Ordinarily my clients would be railroaded in prison. But I get them off. That's why the sanctimonious judges and lawyers have it in for me. I get my clients off."

"You didn't get Jerome Walker off."

Jenkins frowned. "I don't follow you."

"Suppose we begin over again. You were having an affair with Peg Calloway, weren't you?"

Jenkins shrugged. "There's not much point in denying it."

"You helped her get a divorce from Jerome Walker. Is that right?"

"It was only a formality. Walker was in the pen."

"Where you put him."

"Well, hardly." The lawyer wet his lips again. "I won't pretend that I don't see what you're driving at. Maybe it would be quicker if I gave you the facts."

"Go right ahead."

"In the first place," Jenkins said cautiously, "I didn't meet Peg—Mrs. Walker—until Walker's trial. I'd hardly frame a man into the penitentiary because I wanted his wife—on such short acquaintance. Besides, they had the goods on Walker. Darrow himself couldn't have won that case."

"Maybe not," the lieutenant admitted, "but that's immaterial. The important thing is that Peg Calloway was two-timing you, running around with a lad at Stediman's Department Store. Maybe she was even on the point of ditching you. After you'd seen her through—"

Jenkins broke into laughter.

"Please Lieutenant. That's ridiculous. It was just the other way 'round. Peg wanted me to marry her after her final decree. I refused. There never had been any question of marriage. To be honest, we had quite a row about it. I was delighted when she took up with that fellow at Stediman's."

Gordon sat back, regarded the lawyer as if he were some poisonous snake.

"You were Albert Hudnut's lawyer," he said finally.

"We went into that yesterday. I was not Hudnut's lawyer. I handled the legal work for the Hudnut Transfer Lines. I can assure you that I was as surprised as anyone to learn that he trafficked in stolen goods."

Gordon said, "That's hard to believe."

"Why? Do you think there's any connection between Peg's death and the Hudnut killing?"

"Yes, I do."

Jenkins eyes narrowed. "What?"

THE LIEUTENANT didn't answer him. He had noticed that Jenkins' cheeks were glowing red. The lawyer took

a box of aspirins from his pocket, opened it, extracted two. He went to the water cooler, swallowed them.

"I'm afraid I'm coming down with something," he explained. "I was caught out in the rain last night."

"Where were you around nine o'clock yesterday evening?"

"Working on a brief." He turned a curious stare on the detective, but Gordon's expression revealed nothing. "What happened then?"

"I'm asking the questions. Where were you at a quarter of six?"

"I was having dinner at the Brown Grill," he replied after a moment's hesitation. "I'm not sure of the exact time, of course. Maybe the waiter could tell you, I don't know."

"By the way," Gordon said with a shrewd twinkle coming into his hard blue eyes. "Got anything good at Hialeah?"

Jenkins looked startled, then he smiled uncertainly. "Yes. Falling Star in the third. He can't lose. Am I to understand that I'm in the clear?"

"Far as I can see," Gordon said with a shrug. "To tell you the truth, Jenkins, I never did think you did it. Obstructing justice, maybe even a spot of blackmail. But I never did figure you with enough guts to kill."

There was one thing about Jenkins; it was impossible to insult him. He smiled with relief. "You had me worried for a moment there," he confessed.

Gordon said, "Where's Jerome Walker hiding out?"

"I can't help you there," Jenkins said with regret. "But there is something. Hudnut did a lot of his business in cash. He kept between fifteen and twenty thousand dollars in small bills in that safe."

Gordon's eyes narrowed.

"Why didn't you tell us that yesterday?"

"It never occurred to me." He rose, grinning. "Anything else, Lieutenant?"

"No. You can go now. But watch your step—Counselor."

Once Jenkins was gone, Gordon laid down his mangled cigar butt, lit a fresh one. Then he took down his coat and hat, stepped into the outer office.

"Send a man out to the Brown Grill with a picture and description of Jenkins,"

he told the sergeant. "See if he can locate the waiter who served him and find out what time Jenkins ate dinner last night. I'm going to Stediman's. You can reach me there."

At the door he paused. "Want a hot tip for the third at Hialeah?"

"Umm," said the sergeant, which could mean anything.

"Falling Star," said Gordon. "He can't lose."

"That old goat?" the sergeant said. "He can't win."

"That's what I figured," said Gordon and went out.

CHAPTER THREE

The Biggest Fence in Town

LIEUTENANT GORDON found the executives at Stediman's in a stew. Two large, quiet, ominously polite young men from the Federal Bureau of Investigation had presented themselves at the Superintendent's Office that morning. They had been called in, Gordon knew, because Hudnut had transported his stolen merchandise across a state line.

The FBI agents, he learned, had interviewed the girls who had worked with Peg Calloway. They had talked to Dan Lever and even Beth Wood. Then they had taken themselves off. Gordon figured he'd have to hump himself if he were going to beat them to the kill.

The superintendent, still flustered by the FBI agents' devastating air of efficiency, turned over an interviewing booth in the Credit Office to Lieutenant Gordon and said that Dan Lever would be right up.

Lever was a tall, well-knit young man in a conservative grey suit, black shoes, four-in-hand tie and show handkerchief. He entered the booth with an air of alarm, shook hands moistly and sat down.

Lieutenant Gordon wrinkled his nose as he got a whiff of him. The floorwalker was wearing Mountain Dew, a perfume for men.

"I'd like to ask a few questions," Gordon said.

"Shoot." There was a worried, frightened expression on Dan Lever's face. He was very blond, good looking in a

scrubbed, pink fashion. His eyes were dark blue, his lashes dark and long as a girl's, his nails carefully manicured.

"You had a date with the Calloway girl last night?"

Lever nodded. "Only I didn't keep it. I was supposed to pick her up and drive her home, and I didn't do it. Maybe if I had she'd still be alive."

"Maybe. Why'd you stand her up?"

"I—oh, hell, what does it matter now? She was going to quit here and take a job with the Hudnut Transfer Lines. Private secretary for that fellow that was killed yesterday."

Gordon stared at him with a peculiar light in his hard pale blue eyes.

"The Calloway girl was going to work for Albert Hudnut?"

Dan Lever nodded his blond head. "That's what she said. She went to see him on her lunch hour yesterday. We had a hell of a row about it."

"What time?"

Lever looked blank.

"What time yesterday did she see him?"

"On her lunch hour. Between twelve and one o'clock." He swallowed hard. "I see what you mean. She must've been the last person to see Hudnut alive."

"Go on," Gordon said. "You had a fight with her. Then what?"

"Well, yesterday afternoon, I found out that she and that lawyer, the one who'd helped her get her divorce, had adjoining rooms at the Beechmont—and the door wasn't kept locked between them. It gave me a jolt, I can tell you. I was supposed to meet Peg last night and drive her home, but I just couldn't do it. I got in the car and drove and drove. Hell, I don't even know where I went."

"How did you find out about the Calloway girl and Jenkins?"

"Her ex-husband."

"Walker told you?" Gordon said, startled momentarily out of his unimpassioned tone. "Jerome Walker? I didn't know you knew him."

"I didn't." Lever's face pinkened. "Peg told me about him. Walker was just a race-track tout, a small-time gambler—"

"I know that. Get to the point."

Lever looked as if he'd rather bite out his tongue than go on.

"He was released from the pen last week and began pestering Peg for money. She was afraid of him. I—oh, hell, I went up to see him to tell him to lay off Peg. He just laughed at me. Then he told me how Peg had double-crossed him with his lawyer. I knocked him down."

The lieutenant saw that Dan Lever's blue eyes had darkened in memory. The boy looked really dangerous. "What did he do?" he asked in surprise.

"He pulled a knife on me."

"Yeah. So?"

Dan said, "I was in the Rangers during the war. We'd been taught a few tricks about knives. I took it away from him and beat him up. He cut me. Not much. Just a little scratch along my ribs. But I lost my temper, I guess."

"Well, I'll be a lop-eared mule," said Gordon in amazement. "Live and learn."

"I didn't believe him," Dan hastened to say, "but I couldn't get it out of my mind. I went around to the Beechmont Hotel and cornered a bellhop. It cost me twenty dollars before he'd spill what he knew."

"She'd been living with Jenkins, all right. Ever since her husband was sent to the penitentiary." He closed his mouth with a snap. "What a prize sucker I was!"

Gordon frowned.

"Where were you last night at a quarter of six?"

"I don't know. I didn't even come back to work yesterday. I had a few drinks and got in my car and just drove."

"Didn't you stop anywhere? For gas? For another drink, maybe?"

Lever shook his head.

"When did you get home?"

"I don't know. Late. After twelve, I guess."

Gordon sat back, bit off the end of a fresh cigar but didn't light it. Dan Lever watched him apprehensively.

"Did you see the Calloway girl after she returned from Hudnut's office yesterday?"

"Yes, sir."

"What did she say?" Gordon asked. "How did she act?"

"I don't know. She seemed a little strange. Scared, kind of."

Gordon hesitated, then dismissed him after a few more perfunctory questions. Lever departed with alacrity, leaving a faint fragrance behind him.

The phone in the booth rang. Gordon scooped it up.

"Lieutenant," the sergeant's metallic voice rattled through the earpiece, "we located the waiter who served Jenkins last night. He said Jenkins is a regular. He came in about six, he thinks, maybe a little earlier. He ain't sure."

"Okay. Anything on Walker yet?" There was a mumbled negative on the wire. Gordon said, "We'll keep after it," and hung up.

The booth was one of a row enclosed by waist-high railings. Behind him he was conscious of the clack of typewriters from the main office. He took out a leather-bound notebook, began making notes in a crabbed hand, when someone said, "Hello, Flatfoot."

Gordon looked up with a scowl, recognized Beth Wood. She was wearing a green wool dress that set off her wide yellow-brown eyes to advantage. But her face was pale and hollow-cheeked despite a skillful job of makeup.

"I was just going to put in a call for you," Gordon said, glancing at his watch and standing up. "It's lunch time. Get your hat and coat."

"But I'm on duty," she said.

"So am I. But I thought you ought to know what we got on Hudnut's organization. After all, Stediman's were the principal losers. That's your job, isn't it?"

"Ye-es. We could eat down in the tea room, I suppose . . ."

"Nothing doing. This place gives me fidgets. When I came through the fourth floor, damned if there ain't a lady trying on corsets over her dress. Most indecent sight I ever saw. You coming?"

The bait about the Hudnut organization which he'd flung out was irresistible, as he'd known it would be. Beth said, "I'll have to notify the Superintendent's Office. Just a minute, John." She left hurriedly.

Gordon chuckled.

THERE was a subdued clatter of knives and forks and a hum of voices that closed them in an invisible wall of pri-

vacy. Gordon had found a table in a corner and ordered roast beef, coffee and apple pie with ice cream. Beth was picking at a fruit salad.

"You ought to eat something besides that rabbit food. Put a little meat on your bones. I don't like skinny women. Never knew one yet with a decent disposition."

"Oh, you don't," Beth said acidly. "What am I supposed to do about it, pine away?"

"See?" he said. "Listen to you! All nerves. What's scaring you, Beth? If you're hiding anything, you're taking an awful chance. Albert Hudnut and Peg Calloway were both shot with the same gun."

He made the statement so casually that it was a moment before she realized what he had said. Then she caught her breath.

"Both of them?"

"Yeah. Ballistics says it was a .38. The way we got it figured, the Calloway girl walked in on the killer there at Hudnut's office. Maybe just before the murder took place, see. That made her dangerous to the murderer. She was the only one who knew he'd been within miles of Hudnut. He figured he had to knock her off before she could talk. So he waited for her last night and let her have it."

Beth's yellow eyes looked sick, but she didn't say anything.

"We got a pretty good idea why Hudnut was killed, too," Gordon went on in the same tone he might have used to discuss the weather. "Money. He kept between fifteen and twenty thousand dollars in cash in that safe."

Beth moistened her lips.

"How did you find that out?"

"Jenkins told us. He was Hudnut's lawyer. He said Hudnut did a lot of business in cash."

"Jenkins!" Beth's eyes narrowed. "There's a gentleman that will bear watching. I've a feeling—"

"Feeling!" He bit the end off a cigar. "We can't convict a man on a feeling."

"It's too bad you can't. I read a magazine article once that said intuition was subconscious reasoning. Your subconscious, it said, never forgot anything. Then, when you get a hunch about something—like the way I feel about Jenkins—

it isn't blind guess work but your subconscious that has remembered everything and put it all together.

"I use a notebook," said Gordon.

"Just the same," Beth said grimly, "I don't trust him. He knew about the money, you say, and he's been gambling on the horses and—"

"How'd you know that?"

"Peg told me. He's in a financial mess, too. He owes Goodtime Charlie over ten thousand dollars."

Gordon whistled soundlessly. Goodtime Charlie controlled the local handbooks. "Peg tell you that, too?"

"Yes."

"Like to go up and see Charlie?" he asked abruptly.

"No. Don't try to change the subject. Peg wouldn't think anything of seeing Jenkins in Hudnut's office yesterday noon, or of him waiting on the curb for her last night, either."

The lieutenant shook his head.

"Not so fast, Beth. Jenkins was eating at the Brown Grill when the Calloway girl was killed. We checked, and the waiter remembers him."

"The waiter remembers the exact time, I suppose."

"No. But Jenkins eats there regularly, and the waiter's pretty sure he was in around six or a little before. The Calloway girl was murdered at twelve minutes of six."

Beth narrowed her eyes. "That restaurant's on Fourth and Broadway, just two blocks south of Stediman's. Remember, I saw the murderer jump into a car and turn South on Third. It wouldn't have taken Jenkins over five minutes to reach Broadway, park his car, dash inside the restaurant."

"It's not airtight." He gave Beth a strange, searching glance. "What have you got against Jenkins?"

"Nothing. Where was he when Albert Hudnut was killed?"

"He says he was in his office, but his secretary was out to lunch—"

"You see," Beth broke in triumphantly. "He's without an alibi either time!"

"Good Lord, I'd sure hate to have you on my tail. I thought you wanted the dope on the Hudnut organization?"

"Yes. Of course I do. But—"

He said quickly, "Hudnut operated a truck line between Louisville, Indianapolis and Chicago. We rounded up his drivers and helpers. We sweated 'em a little."

BETH looked at the knuckles of Gordon's fists, which were skinned. There was a tired sag to his face, and he needed a shave.

"The trucking business was straight," he said slowly, "but it was just a cover-up. Hudnut was the biggest fence in town. He'd handle anything from diamonds to furniture. His trucks carried the hot stuff to Chicago where he had connections."

"He was behind this racket to swindle Stediman's too. The Calloway girl, we think, gave him the dope on the charge accounts. He passed it along to the local boys and girls—the shoplifters and petty crooks that traded with him. They'd go to Stediman's, charge something and sell it to Hudnut for next to nothing. He was cleaning up."

Beth said, "Jenkins—"

"Jenkins doesn't show in it anywhere. Listen, we worked these boys over in the back room. Some of 'em spilled their guts, and Jenkins' name didn't come up. He's a shyster and crooked as a corkscrew, but he doesn't figure in this. Forget him."

Beth set her jaw, then shrugged.

"Have you talked to Peg's ex-husband yet?"

"No. He's dropped out of sight. But we'll pick him up. We've a man watching his room. Say, that floorwalker—does he ever get up to the credit office?"

Beth's yellow eyes darkened. "No."

"He wouldn't need to, though. He okays returns, special deliveries, that sort of thing, doesn't he? He could get the charges from them just as well as out of the books, couldn't he?"

"Yes. But look here, John, you're barking up the wrong tree. Dan's not mixed up in this. He's a nice kid. Why—why, he was in love with Peg. He wouldn't—"

The lieutenant said flatly, "Maybe she's the one who got him into it."

"That's silly! Why would he kill Peg and Hudnut?"

"Jealousy, fear, greed. All three, more than likely. The Calloway girl must've been a pretty expensive plaything. That's probably how he got started. Then he hit on this scheme to kill Hudnut and loot the safe. All he had to do was walk up there on his lunch hour, do the job and walk back, twenty thousand dollars richer.

"There was only one hitch. Peg saw him. I don't know why she kept quiet. Maybe she was figuring to shake him down. Anyway, he had to kill her before she talked. So he made a date with her . . ."

At Beth's expression he stopped, added, "Don't tell me he isn't the type to kill. I caught something in his eyes this morning. It gave me the creeps. He was a Ranger. I tell you after what some of those guys went through during the war, they'd just as soon shoot you as pass the time of day."

"You're guessing," Beth said uncertainly.

"Some. But he better not show any signs of sudden wealth."

A waitress in a green-and-white uniform refilled Gordon's cup with hot coffee. Beth waited until the girl was out of ear-shot; then she leaned forward and demanded indignantly, "John, why do you have a tail on me?"

An expression of surprise swept across Gordon's tough, round face to be followed instantly by one of alarm.

"You mean somebody's following you around?"

"You know perfectly well there is. John, I won't have it. You take him off right away."

"What does he look like?"

Beth swallowed, her eyes rounding in fright.

"But I thought he was one of your men!"

"Why should I have you shadowed?"

"I don't know. It didn't make sense, but . . ." Her voice trailed off.

He said, "Why would anybody be following you around?"

She shook her head.

"I don't like it," he said. "Do you want protection? I could detail a man to keep his eye on you."

"N-no."

"Look here, Beth, are you in any trouble? First somebody tries to break into your apartment; then he begins to tail you. What's he after, Beth?"

"Nothing!" she said, her face white. "I could be mistaken. I wish I hadn't mentioned it."

He regarded her soberly for a moment. "Yeah," he said with a shrug, "I guess so. Lots of unmarried women get funny ideas that way—men following 'em around, that sort of thing."

"John Gordon," said Beth furiously, "I hate you! That's one of your men, isn't it?"

He shook his head, his eyes slowly hardening. "No, it isn't. But I can't help you if you won't let me."

THE PHONE rang in darkness. At the sixth ring, a reading lamp on the bedside table snapped on. Lieutenant Gordon rose upon one elbow in the old-fashioned, walnut-paneled bed, lifted the phone from its cradle, his eyes puffy with sleep. "Gordon," he said.

"Lieutenant," a man's voice rattled in the receiver, "we've located Walker. He's holed up on Washington Street with a cousin of his. Fellow by the name of Slaughter."

"Send a car for me," Gordon grunted. "I'll be ready in twenty minutes. Don't do anything till I get there."

He put the phone back on its cradle, threw aside the quilts. The furnace had died down and the room was chilly. He shivered as the cold air struck through his pajamas, dressed quickly in the same clothes he'd worn during the day.

Buckling the revolver about his thick waist so that the holster lay just back of his right hip, he went into the kitchen. It was a large kitchen, old-fashioned like the rest of the house, scrupulously clean and cold. He took down a cup from the cabinet, filled it with steaming-hot coffee from a thermos, drank slowly.

When he had finished he rinsed the cup out, dried it, put it back. He returned to his bedroom, turning out the lights, got into his coat, set his grey hat squarely on his head.

The mutter of a siren heralded the approach of the police car as he reached the front door. He glanced at his watch. It

was eleven past three in the morning.

Gordon said, "Hello, Evers," as he climbed in beside the driver, a man in a brown overcoat and brown felt hat.

Evers nodded but said nothing. He had a sharp, grey face, and grey eyes as cold and remote as the stars. He made a U-turn, headed north toward the river. The night was cold, cloudy, with the smell of rain in the air. They swung east on Main, rolling between the brick and stone façades of warehouses, wholesale concerns and trucking companies. At Shelby, Evers swung north again to Washington. He didn't use the siren any more.

This was the old part of town, a district of neglected brick mansions that once had been the homes of riverboat captains. There was still an odor of seedy respectability about it, but the imposing fronts only hid dirt and squalor.

Evers eased up to the curb. A uniformed cop appeared out of the shadows of a building.

"Hello, Lieutenant. It's about halfway up the block. Big brick house. South side. The Slaughters rent the bottom floor."

Gordon nodded. "Where are your men?"

"Both ends of the street. It's closed tight as a drum. Two men in the alley."

"Anybody home?"

"They're home," the cop said. "I don't know whether your man's there, but the Slaughters are home."

Gordon grunted, slid out from behind the wheel. Evers got out on the other side. They started up the sidewalk without saying anything.

A man stepped out of the areaway between two buildings. "It's the next one, Lieutenant," he said. "The one with the light in the front hall."

Gordon nodded. They went on. The pavement felt gritty under foot. There was the smell of soft coal soot in the air. Gordon could hear a switch engine grunting and puffing from the direction of the river. Then a steamboat whistle began to blow—a hoarse, lonely sound.

The house with the light behind the glass-paneled front door was a tall, narrow, three-story structure of faded red brick. The door was on the right, from which three steps descended to the walk. There was a tiny front yard that had been

enclosed at one time by a wrought-iron fence. The fence was gone now, sold for scrap iron more than likely.

Lieutenant Gordon led the way up the steps, rapped on the door. It was a big door, almost eight feet high, the glass panel framed by dingy lace curtains. He had to rap again and again before someone drew the lace curtains aside.

It was a woman, he saw, with her hair done up in curlers. She peered out at them suspiciously.

Gordon showed her his badge. The woman's eyes widened. She let the curtain fall back into place.

Gordon reached for the knob just as the door opened. It swung back, revealing a large, high-ceilinged entrance hall with a stairway leading to the second floor. The woman was blocking the entrance.

"What d'you want?" she demanded fiercely.

"You Mrs. Slaughter?"

"Yes." The single word was harsh, uncompromising.

"We're looking for a man named Jerome Walker."

"He ain't here."

"We'll take a look anyway." Gordon started inside. The woman didn't move, and he had to shoulder her aside.

The woman cursed them with feeling and experience.

Evers fixed her with his mean, hard eyes. "Shut up," he said. The woman shut up.

The hall ran the length of the house, dark, untidy, with doors opening off on the left. Lieutenant Gordon went on down it, opening the doors, flashing his light in the rooms briefly as he went.

Somebody yelled outside. It was followed by two shots in rapid succession. Then a voice shouted, "Lieutenant! Lieutenant!"

Gordon lunged into a run with Evers at his heels. They dashed through a kitchen at the end of the hall and out the back door into a dirty yard, through a brick carriage house into the alley.

Flashlights knifed the darkness like sword blades, centered on a struggling clump of men. Somebody grunted, "I've got him. I think I winged the rat."

A beam of light fell on a tall, red-haired man in an Army jacket, white shirt and

work pants. The left side of the shirt was crimson. He quit struggling suddenly. His face looked thin, pinched, deathly white.

Lieutenant Gordon unbuttoned the man's shirt to examine the wound. He straightened abruptly, a queer expression on his face.

"This isn't a fresh wound," he said. "The bandage's slipped and it's hemorrhaging again. He must've had it for a day or two."

CHAPTER FOUR

Listening Post

THE CITY HOSPITAL corridor was cold and pale green, and smelled of carbolic acid. Lieutenant Gordon said, "How is he?"

"He's okay," the intern replied indifferently. "Flesh wound. He lost a little blood. He'll be nice and fat by the time he's ready to fry."

Gordon regarded the intern with disgust. He was a dark, short young man with the abnormal, affected sense of humor peculiar to doctors during their internship.

"Is it all right to talk to him now?"

"Sure. Why not?"

The stink of carbolic acid made Gordon want to hold his nose as he entered the private room where Jerome Walker was propped up in the hospital bed.

Walker had his eyes closed, but he opened them as Gordon entered and gave the detective a look full of resentment. Tight red curls encased his head like a skull cap. His chin was long, pointed and sported a deep cleft. His mouth was small and tight.

Gordon sat down on the edge of the bed. "Why did you kill her?" he asked.

"I didn't kill nobody!"

"No? Listen, sonny." Gordon tapped the red-haired man on the chest with a blunt, hard forefinger. "We got you right where we want you. If I have to rough you up a bit there're plenty of doctors handy to patch you up. They don't care. Give 'em practice. Whatever happens here don't get out." He kept tapping Walker's chest as he spoke.

"Take your damn hands off me!"

A wolfish grin split Gordon's homely face. "Where's the money?"

"What money?"

"The twenty thousand dollars you took out of Hudnut's safe after you killed him. You're gonna fry for that, you know. Did you ever smell a guy cooking in the chair? It's something you don't forget."

Walker was sweating, but he didn't say anything.

"I got hours and hours," Gordon told him. "I got all the time in the world. Where's the money?"

"I don't know about no money."

"Who shot you?"

"I don't know."

The lieutenant gave Walker a sour, unbelieving look.

"No, I don't and that's the truth," Walker insisted sullenly. "I don't know who done it or what for. I left the house yesterday morning to call a friend. I wanted to find out if the heat was off yet. I hadn't no more than hit the sidewalk when this car came rolling up behind me. Slow. There was only one guy in it—"

"What did he look like?"

"I couldn't tell. He had his hat down and his coat collar turned up. Anyway, I wasn't looking at him too hard because I didn't want to be recognized or—"

"What make car?"

"I don't know. It was a big car with a dark paint job. The driver stuck a pistol out and let me have it. One shot. It felt like somebody hit me in the side with a baseball bat. It knocked me down. I got up and ran back in the house. He gunned the car around the corner."

"Get the license?"

"No." Walker seemed to relax deeper into the pillow. "It's the God's truth, Lieutenant."

"Why didn't you report it?"

"Do I look crazy? Who would believe a story like that?" He widened his eyes. "Do you believe it?"

"No." Gordon was silent for a moment. Then he asked, "Why did you take a powder after Peg was killed?"

Walker laughed weakly. The sound was nearer a croak than a laugh.

"I was made to order for that job. Everybody had it figured I took the rap for Peg as well as myself on that bum check charge."

"Did you?"

"Sure. It wasn't no use both of us being put away. And I didn't have an alibi for the time she was bumped. I was at the picture show. I was the perfect fall guy."

"What show?"

"The Savoy."

"What was there?"

"I don't remember the names. A Western with Gene Autry and a serial all about some fellows with bows and arrows."

"What did you do after the show?"

"It was about nine o'clock and the first edition of the *Courier* was out. I seen where Peg had been killed and figured I'd better lay low until they'd found the killer."

Walker's eyes had a glassy look. It seemed to require a greater and greater effort for him to talk.

"Who were you going to call to find out if the heat was off?"

"A friend."

"Who was it?"

"I ain't taking any more. I want a lawyer," said Walker faintly.

"Who was it?"

Walker didn't answer. His eyes were closed, the lids blue veined. His lips were parted a little so that his teeth glistened in the cold hospital light.

Walker had fainted.

THE DOOR of Lieutenant Gordon's office was open, letting in the mutter of voices, the shuffle of feet, the stale, muggy smell of damp clothes. He picked up a sheet of paper, studied it thoughtfully. It was a typed, detailed report of Beth Wood's movements. His hard blue eyes twinkled. Beth would be burnt up if she ever saw this.

Yesterday, she had left home at 10:03 A.M., carrying a brown-paper-wrapped parcel about the size of a shoe box. She had gone straight to the Bank of Kentucky. Ten minutes later she had left the bank without the package.

There was a penciled note on the paper that Beth had rented a safety deposit box at the bank.

She had reached Stediman's at 10:55. At 12:02 she had gone to lunch with him, Gordon, then had returned to the store.

When the store closed, she'd gone home and locked herself in.

This morning she hadn't left her apartment at all.

Gordon put the paper down, picked up a small cylinder, turned around in his swivel chair to a dictaphone machine. He put on a pair of headphones, started the machine. They hadn't tapped Beth's telephone, but they had managed to plant a dictaphone.

There was a scratching noise, then the tinkle of a telephone bell. Gordon sat there with the headphones on his ears looking like a complacent, fat-faced tomcat.

He heard Beth say, "Hello!" There was a pause, then she said, "Yes. This is her—she." Another longer pause. Then in a frightened voice Beth said, "I don't know what you're talking about."

The cylinder continued to unwind silently. Finally there was a *click* as she put the phone back on the cradle.

There were several other calls, but nothing of importance on the cylinder. He put in a second cylinder. The first call was to Stediman's this morning. Beth told them that she wasn't coming to work, that she had a sick headache and that they could get Stella Graves from the Wideawake Detective Agency to substitute for her.

Gordon was still listening to the record when the phone rang. He took off the headpiece, picked up the receiver.

Decker's excited voice said, "Lieutenant. This is the payoff. It just came through."

"All right, shoot." Decker was the detective planted at the dictaphone in the rooms on the third floor directly above Beth's apartment. Gordon bit down on his cigar, spilling ashes over his vest.

Decker said, "The phone just rang. When she answered it, she gave a little gasp. Then she said, 'Yes. I'll be there. Nine sharp,' and she sounded plenty scared. Then she said, 'Yes, I've got it. No. Oh, no.' Then the guy must've been giving her some kind of directions because she said, 'The east side. Walk south. Yes. I know.' Then she hung up."

"That all?"

Decker said, "Yes."

"Well, sit tight," Gordon said, and put

the receiver back on its cradle. He glanced at his watch. Four o'clock. Five hours yet.

He put on his hat and coat and went out. He bought a five-pound box of candy, had it sent up to Beth's apartment by special messenger, because he was just a little worried by the course he was taking.

AT EIGHT O'CLOCK that night, Evers pulled the plain black limousine into the tree-shadowed curb half a block from Beth Wood's apartment. Lieutenant Gordon was sitting beside him in the front seat, rolling a cigar around in his mouth nervously.

A man, strolling past on the sidewalk, stopped at the car. "Evening, Lieutenant. She hasn't showed yet."

Gordon nodded.

The man moved on toward the end of the block away from the apartment house. "You're taking a hell of a chance," Evers said.

Gordon said sourly, "You take a chance every time you cross a street. I'm going up to see Decker. Something might have developed."

Evers shrugged. "Want me to come along?"

"No. You wait here. She's not due to meet him until nine. But she's liable to be coming out any time and I don't want a

slip-up. We don't know where he told her to go."

He heaved himself out of the front seat, slammed the door, staring at the apartment house. He saw a man and a woman go in together and then another man by himself. But when he reached the foyer there was no one in sight.

Beth's apartment was in the rear; he didn't think she could have seen him. He climbed the three flights heavily, rapped on the door of the room where Decker was camped with his dictaphone.

"It's Gordon," he said softly.

He heard footsteps beyond the door; then it was flung open. Decker almost yanked him inside. Decker's sandy hair was almost standing on end under his headphones. He was clutching a short-hand notebook.

"My God, I'm glad it's you!" he said. "There's something going on down there!"

"What? When?"

"Just a minute ago. I heard the door buzzer. She let somebody in. Then she said, 'You!' Almost at the same time there was a thump like something hitting the floor. I could hear somebody moving around after that, but no more voices. It's still going on. Here, listen!"

He held out the headphones.

Gordon snatched them, clapped them on. His face was grey, shiny with sweat. There was a rustling noise coming



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through the earphones. He was about to tear them off, dash down the stairs, when he heard Beth cry, "Don't move!"

The rustling noise stopped. There was a startled hush; then a man's voice broke into curses.

"Don't try anything!" Beth said in a mean voice. "I won't miss twice."

Gordon found that he could breathe again. Beth was alive and evidently in control of the situation. He pushed back one earphone and growled, "Get downstairs, Decker. Tell Evers I want the place closed. Tight. Don't let anybody out. We got him, by Judas! Now, *move!*"

Decker moved.

Gordon shoved the earphones back into place. The murderer had crossed him up by coming to Beth's apartment, when he had been expecting Beth to go out somewhere to meet him. He was on pins and needles for fear that the situation in the apartment below would get out of Beth's control. But he couldn't resist the temptation to listen in, either. He was literally in a sweat. Then he heard Beth say, "Take off your overcoat."

There was a pause.

"Now your coat," Beth said.

The man's voice said, "For God's sake, be careful with that gun," but it was so distorted by strain and the dictaphone that Gordon never would have recognized it.

After a second, Beth said, "Take out your gun—carefully—and drop it. Don't try anything."

Something hit the floor with a thud, and Beth gave a relieved sigh, said, "Kick it over here."

There was the noise of metal scraping across wood. Gordon guessed that she had disarmed him and muttered, "Good girl!" to himself and wiped the sweat off his forehead.

Beth said, "Now your vest and shirt. That's where I got you the other night, isn't it?"

The man said, "Yes," savagely.

"It's a pity I didn't kill you!"

"But you didn't. It only scooped out a gutter along my ribs."

Above them Lieutenant Gordon spat out his frayed cigar, wiped his sweaty palms on his handkerchief. He could hear the man saying, "How will you explain that?"

"Pooh! It's full of newspaper."

The man was silent; then he began to curse again.

"Stay away from that phone!" he cried suddenly. "You turn me in, and I'll talk about the money!"

GORDON had started for the door at the tone of the man's voice. But he halted, chewing his lip savagely. It was a delicate situation, he told himself in an effort to salve his conscience. If he were to barge in there, it might distract Beth's attention just enough for that fellow to turn the tables on her. The man was desperate. He wouldn't hesitate to shoot his way out.

Beth said, "I figured you'd talk about the money. I was a fool not to turn it over to Lieutenant Gordon when I discovered it. How did you know I had it?"

"I saw Peg give you the package through the plate glass. Don't be a sucker. We can split it."

There was a pause, then Beth said, "My life wouldn't be worth a plugged nickel with you running around loose."

"You're not thinking," the man said earnestly. "Gordon's an ape; he couldn't catch a cold. But even so, if I were to kill you, I would be stretching my luck too far. You take half the money, then you won't be in any position to inform on me. Don't you see, it's to our mutual advantage."

He was talking fast, trying to talk himself out of a spot, Gordon sensed.

Beth said, "Suppose I keep all of it?"

"No. I wouldn't let you do that. Peg tried. I need that money. Need it desperately."

"What did Peg do, walk in on you while you were emptying the safe?"

"That's right. The little tramp! She had a gun on me before I even knew she was there. She hijacked me, left me holding the bag. I couldn't let her get away with that. She'd have blackmailed me the rest of my life."

Beth said dryly, "You'll be figuring the same thing about me."

"No. Listen, you don't know it all. It was *my* idea to take Stediman's on those fake charges. I worked everything out. Then Peg double-crossed me with Hudnut. She sold Hudnut on the idea of cut-

ting me out of my share of the gravy. They thought they had me over a barrel. Hudnut refused to pay off. Not a penny, and I needed the money. But it's different with us. Don't you see, it's just a matter of keeping our mouths shut and going our separate ways—each of us ten thousand dollars richer."

For the first time Beth's tone seemed uncertain.

"But why did you shoot Walker?"

"What do you know about Walker?"

"Only what Lieutenant Gordon told me over the phone this morning. How did you know where he was hiding?"

"Good Lord, I tipped him off that Peg was dead, told him I'd keep in touch with him and let him know when the heat was off."

"You mean he still trusted you?"

"Why not? Peg was a tramp. But you had nicked me the other night when I tried to break in here. A bullet wound isn't easy to conceal. With two of us sporting gunshot wounds..."

He paused, added abruptly, "Besides, Walker is the perfect fall guy. He had motive. Two murders can't go unexplained. The cops must have somebody. All we need to do is plant the gun on him."

"Is this the gun?"

The man said, "Yes."

Beth said in a disgusted voice, "That about ties everything up, doesn't it? I think you're warped. Gordon isn't so dumb as you think. I'm the dumb one..."

"Get away from that phone!" The man's voice cracked in panic. "By—"

Beth gave a startled cry. A shot suddenly banged in the earphones, nearly taking off the top of Lieutenant Gordon's head. He couldn't hear a thing for the ringing in his ears.

Gordon's stomach rose up in his mouth. He'd cut it too fine! He lunged for the door, forgetting all about the headphones. The wires tore out by the roots and he never noticed it.

He reached the hall, flung himself headlong down the stairs. Gun in hand, he hurled his weight against the door of Beth's apartment. It hadn't been ten seconds since the shot.

The door wasn't locked. It crashed open with a bang that shook the walls.

Gordon hurtled across the threshold, recovered his balance.

Beth Wood was struggling with a man on the floor, threshing and kicking frantically, exposing trim, nylon-sheathed shanks.

The man was on one knee. His side was swathed in bandages. He had just succeeded in wrenching the revolver from her.

It was Jenkins, the lawyer.

"Drop it, Jenkins!" Gordon said.

Jenkins gave no sign that he'd heard. Beth kicked at the lawyer desperately as he fired, spoiling his aim. The slug



"I thought it must be you when Jenkins rang the buzzer," she explained.

clipped the door frame behind Gordon's head.

Gordon squeezed the trigger.

The bullet took the lawyer in the throat, flung him over backwards. His limbs twitched spasmodically; then he was still.

Beth looked quickly away. The room stank of burnt powder. She began to cough.

Doors were slamming, voices raised in fright. The clatter of footsteps filled the hall. Lieutenant Gordon shut the door with his heel, shoved the revolver back into his hip holster.

"Are you all right?" he asked Beth anxiously as he helped her to her feet. "I—" He stopped short. His own voice sounded strangely muffled.

Beth, he realized in alarm, was staring at him wide-eyed. She opened her mouth, began to say something. He couldn't make out anything but an indistinguishable muttering.

"Judas!" he burst out in horror. "That shot busted my eardrums!"

Beth yelled, "Headphones!"

He put his hand to his head, began to

grin sheepishly. "What do you know about that. I forgot I had 'em on." He didn't like the glint in Beth's eyes at all.

THE CONNECTING DOOR between bedroom and living room was closed, but the rumble of men's voices was plainly audible. Inside the bedroom, Beth was saying, "I thought it must be you when Jenkins rang the buzzer. That's why I opened the door."

"Yeah," said Gordon who was sitting on the bed, regarding her shrewdly.

Beth had on a simple street dress, with a flaring skirt. Her hands were clasped nervously in her lap.

"He slugged me," she said. "But I wasn't all the way out. I—I had taken the precaution to strap my gun around my leg . . ."

"Yeah," said Gordon without a flicker of expression. "I saw the holster."

Beth's cheeks reddened. "He didn't find it," she went on. "So the minute his back was turned, I pulled it out and told him not to move. He—he tried to bribe me. I started to dial you, but he threw a pillow at me and my shot went wild. Before I could shoot again, he jumped me."

Gordon said complacently, "I had a pretty good idea it was Jenkins, but nothing I could give a jury."

"Hindsight!" Beth sniffed. The glint in her yellow eyes had become a glitter.

"No. Good-time Charlie doesn't like a welcher. If Jenkins hadn't come across with that ten thousand dollars, he would've found himself floating down the Ohio. Besides, he's the only one who could've brought Hudnut and the Cal-loway girl together.

"Walker was touching his ex-wife for money. Why would he kill her? Kinda like killing the goose that laid the golden egg. Anyway, so far as we've been able to find out, he didn't know Hudnut.

"As for Dan Lever, he could've killed the girl, maybe, but I never did think he had knocked off Hudnut. No criminal record. He hadn't known Peg but for a short while."

"But you talked as if you—"

"I was needling you," Gordon admitted gravely, "and I couldn't be sure—"

There was a rap on the door. Evers

stuck his head inside. "We're through out here," he said.

"Okay," said Gordon, "you can go ahead."

He and Beth were silent, listening to the sounds of retreating voices, the slam of a door.

"Well," Gordon said at length, "that ties everything up. All except the money. I expect we better find it in Jenkins' room when we search it tomorrow. That'll give you a chance to get it out of your safety deposit box."

Beth gave a start, swallowed, her eyes slowly filling with apprehension.

"You knew I had it all the time!" she said accusingly. "It *was* your man who was following me around!"

Gordon looked uncomfortable. "I thought you oughta have some protection," he admitted, "and you wouldn't—"

"Protection! John Gordon, you were using me for bait! You're a cold-blooded beast, that's what you are! And all the time I was so ashamed of myself and just frantic trying to think of some way to give you the money without letting you know I'd almost kept it." She drew herself up. "All right, take me to jail!"

"What are you talking about?" he demanded in exasperation. "Why do you think I've gone to all this trouble to fix it so nobody will know you had the money?"

"For no good reason, I'll bet!"

He ignored the interruption.

"Beth, you're a lonely woman. You need to get married. A good-looking woman like you is wasting herself chasing after shoplifters. You oughta have a home and a husband to occupy your mind. Now, I've got a nice little bungalow in the west end—"

"John," Beth asked weakly, "is this your idea of a proposal?"

"Damn it, Beth, yes!"

Beth looked as if she didn't know whether to laugh or cry; then she looked inordinately pleased and happy.

Lieutenant Gordon, who had been watching her closer than he appeared to be doing, repressed a grin.

"Besides," he added as a clincher, "anybody with no more scruples than you have needs a detective to look out for her."

LIGHT UP THE GRAVEYARD!

(Continued from page 35)

"Easy! You'll start another slide! We'll both go over the edge!"

Seated on the giant engine, Eva yanked back a lever. The monster wheeled obediently, seeming to pick its way carefully over the slope under the woman's skillful hands.

When she lowered the blade, Eva said between her teeth, "We got to take a chance, Eddie. There just ain't no other way."

EDDIE watched the shining blade bite into the loose earth below him. Eva was working the cat between him and the ledge, and Eddie held his breath, as if by this act he could avert the avalanche that would surely come if the bulldozer started to slide.

It began when he was almost free. Eva gunned the cat, and the engine bellowed angrily above the whisper of the rock. Eddie twisted frantically, freed himself from the shale. But now the whole slope was in motion. Eddie felt it shifting beneath his feet.

Eva yelled, "Climb on!" and spun the nose of the cat toward Eddie. For the man, it took an eternity.

Eddie jumped on the blade, and clung there desperately while Eva steered a diagonal course across the slowly creeping slope.

He didn't really believe it when they made the other side. Even later, sitting with Eva in the café, he had to keep checking the mirror to make sure he really was there.

Eva said, "Eat your steak. You'll feel better."

"Okay." But somehow Eddie couldn't concentrate on the food. He was thinking of Eva out there on that slope, handling that diesel like a man—better than a man, then coming home as if nothing had happened, and frying him one damn good steak.

He wanted to tell her how he had changed, to say that he was beginning a new and better life. He wanted to—but he had no words. Grinning, Eddie sliced off a hunk of the steak, stuffed it into his mouth—and told her his thoughts with his eyes.

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DETECTIVE TALES

(Continued from page 64)

her clothes. You put her in the tub. And you turned on the cold water, you dope!" He snarled, "Get up, get up!"

But Runk sat on the floor. A little blood dribbled over his thick lips.

Graeme grabbed Runk by one ear, jerked. Runk screamed. "Get up, get up!" Graeme ordered.

Fingers grabbed Graeme's wrist. "Please, Mr. Gra-em," the girl begged. "Don't—don't hit him again."

He relaxed slowly. "The snake," he said. "I didn't like the case when I first saw it. But we don't start prying until we're sure. We like to give a killer a little time to think he's safe. When you came to see me, Miss Lord, I was sure she had been murdered. I pulled the casual stuff on you to get you off guard. That way, I figured that whatever you had, you'd let slip when you got mad. We're not stupid, believe me."

"Not stupid," she said softly. "Not stupid at all. . . ."

"You were foolish to come in here," he said. "Runk might have killed you. He was at the bottom of the stairs earlier when you talked to me. He would want to know what you had told me, see?" He patted her shoulder, pushed her towards the door. "Phone headquarters," he ordered, and she hurried out.

GRAEME sat at the hard chair in the call room. He picked up the slip of paper on the desk, the paper that said in part: ". . . your excellent work on the Runk-Cussick case entitles you to take an earlier examination for detective, first grade, on the 22nd of next month and . . ."

He tilted back in the chair. The exam would be easy, he thought. Just like that, two steps in one, Graeme. Slowly, dreamily, he began to climb the steps to lieutenant, then to captain, and a private office and stenographer.

Then the chair came down with a bang on the floor. All along, he had known, he had left out an important detail.

"You don't climb alone," he muttered, and he was thinking of a girl with blonde hair and green eyes. Sea-green eyes, like the water off Bayhead.

COLLECTION NIGHT

(Continued from page 72)

the youngsters loved him. They always had. Even the tough kids on Lock Hill. He was a natural for politics. And all the "boys" I'd seen had been new ones. I hadn't seen the Torp at all, nor anybody connected with our old gang. Chances were, the Torp had been put away just as neatly as I was being put away. Gus couldn't afford to have his past appear. And Carol was just as ambitious as he was, just as ruthless. She was helping him, helping him cover anything that might hurt later.

The Rock looks pretty when you see it out in San Francisco Bay. There's the Golden Gate on one side and the Oakland Bridge on the other. The mainland isn't very far. There are sailboats out there, and excursion steamers. And there's sunshine during the days. Nights and early mornings, the fog comes in and you wonder if you can't wrap it around you and swim to shore.

I've been thinking about escape for a long time. I've been planning it. I'm a good swimmer. They tell me it can't be done, but I always figure there's a first time. My luck is due for a change. And Big Gus Dooley is ripe for a bullet in the back. He's got it coming, and a lot of citizens will be better off if he gets it.

Carol said something once about a violin. I didn't get it then, but I do now. So I'm singing on paper. I'm writing it all down here, just the way it happened. I never sang in my life, but I'm leaving this account with a pal of mine when I go for my swim. If the guards get me, or the sharks, I'll be like the tree Carol was talking about. Alive, I was silent. Now dead, I sing!

This pal of mine is going to tear the whole story up if I get away. But, if I don't make it, he'll give it to the warden and there will be an investigation and my little song will be printed for the public and there'll be a certain guy who won't ever get to the top in politics, a certain dame who will get kicked off the social register.

It's worth a try. Either way you look at it, I've paid back Big Gus Dooley for his sunshine, and Carol for her kisses.



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DETECTIVE TALES

(Continued from page 93)

Ten feet beyond the car lay a very still form. It was spread flat on the ground. Flatter than a living man can get. The valley wind was feathering the hair on the back of Cheney's head. That was all about him that moved.

I leaned heavily against the car, sucking for breath.

"I heard the firing," Elsa explained, "and then Vince ran out of the building. I saw the gun in his hand. When he reached for the car door, I shot him. He ran on a few steps before he fell."

I nodded numbly, fighting for enough strength to keep legs under me. "You shot him," I gasped. "Where did you get the gun?"

"I had it in my purse," Elsa answered simply.

"In your purse? Then you meant—you meant to shoot him, all the time! All the time I've been chasing this joker around the country, it was so you could catch up with him and kill him! That's great. That's wonderful."

She was shaking her head. "Only since I lost your money, Joe. I've only had the gun since then."

I wrenched the car door open and slumped onto the seat beside her.

"Why don't you say it, Joe?" she said.

"Say what?" I mumbled. "What is there to say?"

"That you hate me for all the trouble I've caused you."

I shook my head, lifted my wounded arm so it lay in my lap. "No, baby," I answered. "I don't hate you. But when you can shoot like that," I nodded in the direction of her late spouse, "Feeny is going to stay in his place."

Elsa quietly dropped her gun on the back seat. "Better, Joe?" she asked.

I tried to smile. "A lot better. Let's keep it that way."

The driveway was beginning to fill with people, other guests of Blondie's auto court—curious, staring morbidly at Vince's dead body, chattering among themselves, pointing.

I guess it did look silly, Elsa kissing me right there in front of God and a Monterey County Deputy Sheriff.

THE END

THE CRIME CLINIC

(Continued from page 103)

reached into her evening bag and came forth with the most magnificent pocket watch it has ever been my fortune to see. Of solid gold, it had a twenty-carat ruby for a stem winder and diamonds to mark the position of the hands.

"You can imagine how my eyes lit up when I gazed at that marvelous timepiece. I could scarcely think of words to show my joy of possession, and my great love for Gertie, as well. I also did not have much time, inasmuch as I had a business engagement in the town house of the wealthy Fullerton family. So I appended the watch to my chain, kissed Gertie's hand most gently, saw her off in a handsome cab and set about my business with the Fullertons.

"I shall not bore you with the details of my work. Suffice it to say that ten minutes later I was in the library of the Fullerton mansion, curiously examining the jewelry of their wall safe. Suddenly I heard a noise outside the door. There were anxious voices, two of them speaking in the authoritative tones that the police all over the world use to still their own fears. Somehow, I realized, I must have set off a burglar alarm. I peered quickly around me. The window! There was a ledge outside that I could stand on until the excitement had blown over. In a trice I was standing out there, listening to the hubbub inside as the police came across the open safe.

"'No one here,' a policeman's voice said. 'Look out the window, Joe.' A head came out the window—I was standing to one side—and looked down. 'No way out here,' said the man in the window. 'He must have gone out before we came.' I breathed a sigh of relief. I was safe! All I had to do was wait for the police to make their exit, and I could go back into the library and get away.

"I was feeling so cheerful, I almost felt like breaking into song. But it was then that I heard the strange sound—a muffled but deep and penetrating *bong*. The police heard it, too, inside the library. 'What's that?' one of them said. 'Sounds like it's coming from out the window.' I listened myself for the source of the noise. My heart sank when I located it—

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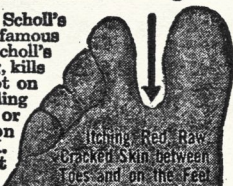
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DETECTIVE TALES

it was coming right out of my own waist-coat pocket! I knew the worst then: Gertie had presented me with a chiming watch. . . .

GENTLEMAN JIM heaved a great sigh. "Ever since then," he said, "I have never worn a watch. Three years in Sing Sing taught me that." He rose slowly to his feet and grasped his gold-headed cane.

"Well," he said, "I must be off now." He added sadly, "I am certain, anyway, that after the exhilarating stories you run



"Well," Gentleman Jim said, "I must be off now."

in your fine detective magazine, my little true-life opus must sound, I'm afraid, somewhat dull."

He rapped his cane on the floor. "Still," he said, "I make no apologies. Things have speeded up since my youth, and a magazine such as DETECTIVE TALES, if it is to be abreast of the times, must race along at the break-neck, exciting pace of the news itself. I presume you have something special for next month?"

"Right as rain, Gentleman Jim," we said. "There's an exciting murder novel by Dorothy Dunn coming, and in case that's not enough, there're going to be novelettes and short stories by Francis K. Allam, Charles Larson, Earl Peirce, and plenty of other authors that all our readers go for. How's that sound?"

"Excellent," Gentleman Jim said. "And the publishing date?"

"August 26th," we told him.

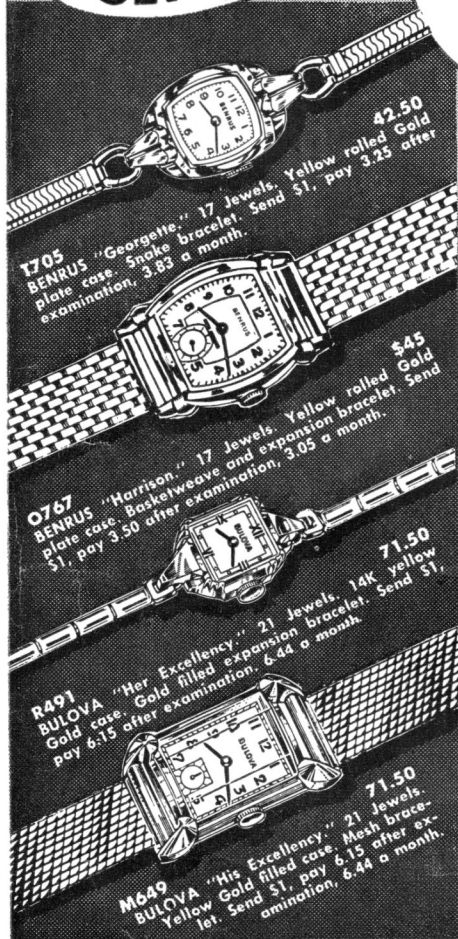
"I shall look forward to that date," Gentleman Jim said. "Good-bye for now."

—The Editor

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